# THE GREAT HOLD-UP MYSTERY

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*First published in* 1928

# *The Great Hold-Up Mystery*

*by*

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INTERNATIONAL FICTION LIBRARY
CLEVELAND NEW YORK
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CLEVELAND

*In addition to giving the customary assurance that the characters in the yarn which follows are imaginary, the author wishes to make it clear that the liberties taken with certain megalithic remains are intentional, and that the house on the island, together with its various approaches, has no existence whatever outside his own fancy.*

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# THE GREAT HOLD-UP MYSTERY

## CHAPTER I

### THE MAN WITH HAY-FEVER

### (1)

At the moment when the three shots rang out, Peter Brown was sitting alone on the stone wall that runs by the quay at Tregenneth, the little Cornish fishing-village, smoking a final pipe before turning in as he watched the play of moonlight on the river. The sound at such an hour—for it was after eleven—was so unexpected that for a few moments he continued to sit in a kind of dazed astonishment. Then the patter of running feet made him turn his head sharply, and he beheld a man a hundred yards away, racing towards the quay as if for his life. And a little distance behind him ran several others.

He was a fat man, the foremost runner, with a bare bald head that gleamed white under the moon, but despite his bulk he covered the ground well, and by the time he reached that part of the quay near where Peter was sitting he was fully fifteen yards ahead, apparently making for some steps which led down to the water. Before he could reach them, however,

disaster overtook him in a singular fashion; for suddenly, as he ran, he gave a tremendous sneeze. Whether this circumstance was in itself responsible, or whether his foot caught in something on the surface of the quay, it is impossible to say; at any rate he tripped and fell; and before he could recover, his pursuers—Peter counted four of them—were upon him.

It was at this juncture that Peter decided to take a hand in the game. Normally an amiable individual who disliked rows, he disliked still more the spectacle of a middle-aged man of stout aspect being set upon by four others. He hesitated only long enough to take off his spectacles and slip them in his pocket; then he darted forward with that agility which had once made him one of the most famous rugby three-quarters in England. And since he was wearing rubbers on his feet, his approach possessed in large measure that element of surprise which constitutes in all warfare the surest prelude to success.

There was no doubt about the surprise. Indeed, if a tornado had burst above the heads of those four men they could hardly have been more astonished. One of the ruffians was kneeling on the prostrate man's chest, apparently trying to tear open his waistcoat, when an iron hand seized him by the neck from behind, another grip fastened on the seat of his trousers, and he was flung full into the bosom of one of his friends who unwisely chose that instant to slink up; with the result that he, in his turn, cannoned into yet a third. All fell in a mix-up on the ground; while Peter, turning, was in time to meet the rush of the fourth man, a huge mulatto. One rapid glance was

sufficient to convince Peter that he was no match for the coloured man at close quarters, so he dived like lightning for his legs. The mulatto's head met the ground with a crack, and for a time, at least, his interest in the proceedings was negligible, while Peter had a moment's leisure to see how the situation was developing elsewhere.

The fat man, profiting by the respite, had regained his feet. Peter had a glimpse of him in the act of charging his assailants like an enraged bull, but it was no more than a glimpse, for he suddenly became aware of a new peril. Creeping towards him with a peculiar sinuous movement was a slight man, some kind of foreigner, who held in his hand a weapon that looked like a razor without the handle. His lips rolled back in a malevolent grin as he saw his approach was discovered, but he did not cease his stealthy advance, planting one foot in front of another with the soft tread of a marauding cat.

With a queer constricted feeling in the region of the breast-bone Peter waited for him, leaning a little forward on the balls of his feet, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Of the methods of attack practised by razor-slashers he was in entire ignorance, but he remembered how years ago, during the War, a Canadian gunner, by way of passing the time in a convalescent home, had taught him the trick of defeating an aggressor armed with a knife. The ruse depended largely for its success upon watching one's adversary's eyes, and he breathed a little prayer of thankfulness that he had the moon behind him.

To this fact he undoubtedly owed his safety, for,

just before his assailant sprang, there leapt into his eyes an unmistakable warning of his intention. And in that instant, with a frantic movement, Peter hurled himself to the right. The razor swept harmlessly, and then, before the man could recover himself, Peter's hands were upon him. There was a quick twist—no violent effort—followed by a yelp of pain and a sound like a stick being broken under water. The weapon fell to the ground, and Peter, stepping back a pace, let the other have his left on the point of the chin. And number two of the attacking party flopped over like a dead thing.

So far as Peter was concerned, that ended the fight. The remaining two ruffians, who had been having an uncomfortable time at the formidable hands of the fat man, now, on Peter's approach, immediately took to their heels; and hardly had they disappeared, when the big mulatto, recovering consciousness, staggered to his feet. He gave one wild look round, and finding himself deserted, promptly followed the example of his companions and bolted.

"Cleared out, by George, the whole bunch!" declared the fat man breathlessly. "Laddie, I don't know who you are, but—"

He broke off, staring over Peter's shoulders, and turning, Peter saw why. Crawling along the ground in the evident hope of escaping observation, was the man whom he had hit on the jaw.

Suddenly Peter perceived his objective—the razor which lay near the edge of the quay, where he had carelessly kicked it after knocking out his man. He sprang forward, and immediately the man, abandoning

all efforts at concealment, leapt to his feet. It was Peter who reached the weapon first, however, and he covered it with one foot.

"I think not," he said quietly.

The next moment the fat man, coming up behind, had seized the enemy by the coat collar.

"Now, you scum!" he cried. "Try to murder me, would you! Why, you damned little squirt, for two pins I'd tear you in half. Did he hurt you just now?" he demanded of Peter.

"He had a jolly good try to. I rather think I broke his arm, though."

"Broke his arm?—pity it wasn't his head!" growled the fat man. "Got anything to say, you?"—this to his prisoner, whose sullen eyes were fixed on Peter.

The man slowly felt his dangling arm, and Peter noticed that his face was disfigured by a huge scar that ran across cheek and nose.

"I not forget you," he said deliberately. "One dese days—I kill you!"

The fat man laughed in a soft and particularly unpleasant fashion.

"Indeed," he said, in a silky voice, "and pray what makes you think you're going to live so long? Kill, by George!"—and here his voice began to gain in volume. "I reckon the boot's on the other leg! Listen here, little man. I'm not going to kill you here and now, because you'd be a nuisance, and I've no time to waste on coroner's courts and things. But by the living God, if ever I lay hands on you again after this I'll break every bone in your body and dance on the remains

afterwards. D'ye hear? Now go before I change my mind, and thank your lucky stars I'm a humane, kind man. Understand? And if I catch you monkeying round here again to-night, sure as my name's Jim Bridgewater I'll smash your ugly face in, broken arm or no broken arm! Now run away back to Horstman. *Impshi! Futsack!* Or by the Lord, I'll——"

Here he suddenly gave his prisoner a mighty shove that sent him ten paces, and then, taking a run, launched a tremendous kick at the flying man which, had it taken full effect, would assuredly have given him cause to remember the moment for long afterwards. Mr. Bridgewater returned, wheezing audibly, but with his face agleam with laughter.

"Filthy little swine, ain't they!" he said cheerfully. "I must apologize for my language, but it's the only kind that sort of blackguard understands." He sneezed twice, then added: "We'll collect the spoils of war."

Picking up the razor, he glanced at it and pitched it into the river. "Hurt?" he inquired.

"Not at all, thanks. How about you?" said Peter. "That was a nasty purler you went just now."

Mr. Bridgewater gave a contemptuous snort. "Pooh, that was nothing. My dear fellow, it takes more than that to hurt me. What I'm sorry about is having to let 'em get away so easy, but there's no alternative, unfortunately. I don't suppose this place has a policeman, let alone a lock-up. The dirty cowards—they came on me suddenly, five of them—and one started getting busy with a gun, damn him."

"I heard him," said Peter.

"That was Horstman—you didn't see him," went on Mr. Bridgewater, who seemed to find relief in talking. "He's too lame to go running races in the dark. Well, I'm not a tenderfoot cowboy that I should go about with a six-shooter in my hip, so not carrying a gun I ran for it, remembering a wise tag about a lame dog. I'd have got clean away, too, if my cursed hay-fever hadn't come along and made me trip and embrace Mother Earth with rather more affection than I usually bestow on that hard-bosomed lady. But it was worth my trouble to see the way you set about them—upon my soul, I couldn't have done it better myself. Quite sure you're not hurt?" he insisted, casting an anxious eye over his rescuer.

Peter laughed. He rather liked this large garrulous man who could show such solicitude for another when he had only just escaped what had every appearance of being a violent attempt on his life.

"Not a scratch," he assured him. "I suppose, by the way, your friends are not indulging in what the newspapers used to call a strategic retirement, and intend coming back with reinforcements? Because——"

"Come back? Not they!" cried Mr. Bridgewater with a confident laugh. "They won't trouble us again if I know anything of the breed. They've had their bellyful for one night, I fancy. But look here, laddie, I haven't properly thanked you——"

"Please don't," said Peter hastily. "In any case I suggest we move away from here, in case your friend with the pistol decides on a forlorn hope. I don't

know whether you live here or not, but I'm staying at a cottage about half a mile away, if you'd care to come and have a clean up."

Mr. Bridgewater consulted his watch. "Thanks, I will. It's too late now to find the man I'm looking for. Excuse me one moment."

Whereupon this strange man produced a small glass instrument with a bulb attachment like a scent-spray, and proceeded to apply it to his nostrils. The treatment was evidently effectual, for he drew several deep breaths with every appearance of satisfaction.

Peter began to put on his spectacles, when he noticed that his new acquaintance had paused, and was regarding him with an amused smile.

"Do you usually have time to take your glasses off when you come to the rescue of middle-aged men in distress?" he inquired with a chuckle.

Peter smiled. "Well, as a matter of fact, I see much better without them," he confessed. "They aren't really necessary, but I happened to have a slight accident to one eye during the War—" he broke off, for Mr. Bridgewater's large face had changed like a conjuring trick, and he was staring open-mouthed.

"Well, if this ain't providence I don't know what is," he said in a new voice. "Are you by any blessed chance P. J. Brown, the rugger-man?"

"Yes. Why?" asked Peter mildly.

"It's a sign from Heaven," Mr. Bridgewater declared solemnly. "You're the very man I've come to these parts to see."

## (II)

Half an hour later, scraped and cleaned into some semblance of respectability, and with several strips of sticking-plaster across his forehead, Mr. Bridgewater sat in the solitary arm-chair that Peter's sitting-room boasted, smoking a vile-smelling cigarette which, he explained, alleviated his hay-fever.

Seen in the light he proved to be a much more powerfully-built man than Peter had supposed. There was latent strength in the broad shoulders and deep chest. He had a massive face, sallow and heavily lined, with a wide tolerant mouth, and a dominant nose like Mr. Punch. His eyes were at present suffused with his distressing malady, but they were kindly, and for all his air of complacency, there was that about the shape of his jaw that hinted at his being an unhealthily efficient person to play monkey-tricks with; and Peter had evidence that in his case excess of flesh did not necessarily mean lack of agility. His years looked to be about forty-five.

"Well, Mr. Brown, I expect you're thinking it's time I gave an account of myself," he said, stretching his legs in front of him. "You probably wonder what in the name of sanity and common sense a fellow of my age and spread is doing scrapping with a lot of dock-sweepings at this time of night."

Peter nodded. On the way up from the quay Mr. Bridgewater had given no hint as to the motives of the gang in attacking him. Realizing that his companion was a man who would tell his story in his own way,

Peter had forborne to ask questions, but he certainly felt intensely curious.

"I'll enlighten you," Mr. Bridgewater proceeded. "I came down here by car, which I left in a field some way out of the village, and I was going to sleep there if I couldn't find anywhere else. I should have been here earlier if I hadn't been delayed by two punctures, one of which I had to mend myself. I came into the village on foot; and, as I told you, when Horstman and his merry men appeared from nowhere and started mistaking me for a moving target, I didn't linger, and a lucky thing it was for me he was the only one with a gun. As it was I half-expected a knife in my back any moment. They're pretty handy with their knives, some of those boys. I've seen one split an apple at thirty paces before now. What beats me is how Horstman knew I was coming here; I only landed at Croydon early this morning. Tell me, now, I believe you know a man named Cartwright—Colonel Richard Cartwright?"

"Old Dick? I used to know him very well indeed at one time."

"So I am given to understand; he happens to be a friend of mine also. He told me quite a lot about some of your exploits in the War."

"Dick is a silly ass," said Peter laughing. "What is he doing now, by the way? The last I heard of him he was on some kind of secret police work in Egypt."

"Dick is at the present moment—or he was two days ago—lying ill with pneumonia in a place called Bratislava in Czecho-Slovakia. I've come straight from him."

"Is he seriously ill?"

"He was, but he's pulling round. Naturally he won't move about for a bit. I was to show you this by way of credentials."

Mr. Bridgewater took from his pocket a bunch of keys, one of which he held out for the inspection of Peter, who, noticing what was scratched on the wards, experienced a sudden feeling of annoyance. Once during the War, in a certain Italian town, he had secretly met by appointment an agent, a harmless-looking civilian in a bowler hat, who, he had been informed, was one of the cleverest spies in the service of the allies. It had been arranged that this man, whom Peter, then a pilot in the R.A.F., was going to attempt to drop in Austrian territory from a parachute, should reveal his identity by means of a sign. The key which Mr. Bridgewater had handed to him bore a precisely similar marking, and it brought back the memory of certain things which he thought he had finished with for ever.

"Go on," said Peter quietly, as he gave back the keys. "Let's hear the worst. Dick always was a bird of ill-omen."

Mr. Bridgewater heaved his heavy body forward in his chair and began to speak with the grave deliberation of a man who weighs the value of each word before uttering it.

"I'm going to tell you a little story. You must know that some time ago our people became interested in a certain man who had made a reputation, to say nothing of a small fortune, out of the War. You have heard of the Drude Submarine Detector and the Drude

Mortar—well, Sir Mortimer Drude is our man. If you will look him up in 'Who's Who' you will learn among other things that he is a distinguished physicist, the author of several notable works on scientific subjects—I am told his monograph on the Brownian movement is already a classic—and that he lives in Okewood Hall in Devonshire. I can supplement that record a little. Before the War he was an amiable and popular professor at one of the minor universities, loved by his friends and respected wherever he went. He resigned his position early in the War to devote his energies to the perfecting of those inventions which made him famous, and, incidentally, transformed him from a comparatively poor man into a fairly rich one. After the War he went away for a six months' holiday abroad. Where he went to no one but himself knows, but he came back a changed man. His entire nature had altered. From being one of the most open-hearted and charitable men in the world, he became secretive and suspicious. He shut himself up in his house and would see no one: became a misanthropist, detested by his neighbours, to most of whom he was unbearably rude, and the despair of his former friends. So he has been ever since. Twice every year he goes abroad, no one knows where. For the rest he spends most of his time in his laboratory, locked up with his assistants. Only for one person he seems to have any kind of toleration, and that is his niece, an orphan who has lived with him for some years. The two, it appears, are devoted to each other, which is the more remarkable as she is a girl of some personal attraction, who you would think would be happier in

an environment more suited to her youth and position. I should perhaps mention that Sir Mortimer is over sixty, a widower, and has no children of his own.

"Now you must also know that our people sometimes pick up very odd bits of information from all sorts of queer places. It so happened that we heard rumours of an unusual piece of business going on on the Continent. We got a line on it through a Polish Jew, a gentleman who had once belonged to a certain secret service that had since gone out of business in that line on account of the poor state of trade. He kept a coffee-house in the Ringstrasse in Vienna, very respectable and proper, but as his name wasn't the one he was known by in Berlin we kept an avuncular eye on him for old acquaintance' sake. One of our men happened to be in this place one evening when some Americans belonging to the A.R.A. came in. They had with them a compatriot whom our man thought he had seen before; he couldn't at first recollect where, until some little mannerism or movement helped his memory, and then he knew. He was one of the biggest men in one of the old underworlds of Berlin. He was now talking like an American of good breeding, and was apparently engaged in showing the A.R.A. men round Vienna, but our man had had dealings with him before and made no mistake. That chance meeting resulted in our learning quite a lot of things. One was that the Polish Jew-boy was acting in connection with some mysterious syndicate that was out to obtain the sole rights for some secret discovery at present in the possession of Monsieur X; moreover this syndicate had already offered an enormous sum

of money which had not yet been accepted, and negotiations were still in progress. The sum mentioned was one million pounds. Another thing we learnt was the names of some of the syndicate, and a nice lot they were.

"One passed as a Lithuanian diamond merchant who owed his wealth to having been an international receiver at the time the homes of the Russian aristocracy were being broken up. A second was Kreller, the renegade Englishman who enjoyed the peculiar distinction of having fought on both sides in the War, first in the French Foreign Legion and then in an Austrian Infantry regiment. Another was the notorious Pagleiro or Straussmann, who seems to have been everything from an Albanian brigand to a secret-film proprietor. I could name a dozen, but though they came from nearly every country in Europe, they were all alike in one particular respect: they reeked with rottenness and degeneration. There was not a man among them who wasn't an outcast and enemy of organized society. But that didn't mean there was any lack of funds. We had ample evidence of the extent of the financial backing.

"Well, these people being what they were, we were at some pains to discover the identity of the mysterious Monsieur X. There was no Monsieur about him: he was an Englishman and his name was Sir Mortimer Drude.

"You may say it was no business of ours. There was an eminent scientist with a fine record of service to his name and a K.C.B. into the bargain. If he chose to be so unwise as to sell an invention or discovery or

process, whatever it was, to a syndicate composed of some of the biggest rogues in international crookdom, what had it do with us? There was no question of the law being broken. To go to Sir Mortimer and warn him of the kind of people he was dealing with was simply showing what cards we held if he was playing a crooked game. We decided to do a little more private inquiry work, and put a good man on. It was so contrived that he became a servant in Sir Mortimer's household. He was a clever man and at the end of four months he brought us something that might be a clue to the secret and might not. I have it in my possession now and I want you to see it."

Peter looked curiously at the three creased sheets of foolscap which the other took from a hidden pocket in the lining of his waistcoat. Each sheet was covered with rows of figures, written very small and neat, except one on which they stopped short half-way down the page.

"Cipher?" he inquired. Mr. Bridgewater shook his head.

"Now you've asked me. Two of the biggest cipher experts in the country have been working at it without any result. That doesn't mean, of course, that it can't be deciphered. It's quite possible to make a cipher by means of stencils and key-words that no man in the world can read. But this may be some secret kind of shorthand—we have no means of telling! It may even be an elaborate formula. What we do know is, firstly, that the writing is Sir Mortimer's, and the circumstances under which he wrote it; secondly, that Sir Mortimer is moving Heaven and earth to

recover it. You saw yourself to-night to what lengths he was prepared to go."

"D'you mean—those fellows on the quay?" said Peter in astonishment.

"I don't mean that Sir Mortimer himself was there, of course; but the sole object of that attack was to get this paper from me. Thanks to you, it failed, and friend Horstman, the man in charge of to-night's attempt, won't love you for it. How he got word of the fact that I was coming down here I can't explain, but there it is."

Peter handed back the papers with a thoughtful expression.

"What's their history?" he asked.

"Our man found that Sir Mortimer was spending night after night alone, locked in his laboratory. He was working at something—something he wanted to keep so secret that even his two laboratory assistants were excluded. Then one night he was interrupted —two foreigners arrived in the small hours demanding to see him—and on leaving he left the door open. It was the opportunity which our man had been waiting for. He had been in the laboratory before and had already examined much of the apparatus that is always lying about a big laboratory, without having found any clue to the nature of Sir Mortimer's nocturnal experiments, however. But this time he was luckier. On the previous occasion he had noticed a large cupboard, about the size of a bathing-machine, and stoutly built of wood, with a Yale lock: this cupboard was now open, revealing what at first sight looked like a magnificent radio-receiving set. But a

second glance convinced him it was no ordinary set. It was totally unlike one he had ever seen before. In front was a small table on which lay a pile of manuscript and a pair of headphones. Clapping the latter on his head he heard a loud ticking noise going on—not Morse, but presumably some other code, for it was intermittent. As he listened his eyes ran over the bewildering array of instruments and valves on the board in front of him and they rested on a curious thing. In one corner was a square of ground-glass, about the size of the one on a reflex camera, and shadows were moving across it. He was going to examine it more closely when he heard footsteps approaching, and had to hide behind a bench. It was Sir Mortimer come back to shut up shop. He came in, noticed nothing out of the ordinary, switched off the valves, hung up the phones, and locked the cupboard; then he turned off the light at the door and went out, locking the door behind him.

"Waiting a little in case he returned unexpectedly our man presently switched on his torch and tried to open the cupboard. Short of bursting the lock it was impossible—you can't pick a Yale with a bit of iron. While he was considering his next move he noticed that Sir Mortimer had left his manuscripts behind, and he picked up some of the sheets. They were covered with little rows of figures, as you've seen. Suddenly to his annoyance he heard footsteps again, and he had barely time to hide behind the bench before the door opened once more, the light was switched on, and Sir Mortimer came in with the two foreigners.

"He was speaking as he entered, and the words he used were interesting.

"'You shall see for yourselves, gentlemen,' he said, 'that I do not exaggerate when I say that the man with this knowledge in his possession would be among the most powerful men in the world.'

"That was something of a startler for our man, but it was nothing to Sir Mortimer's next words, for he suddenly cried out: 'There's been someone at my papers: the top sheet was only half-covered.'

"Then our man realized the game was up. He was a fellow of considerable resource, and before one of the men could so much as raise a hand to stop him he had smashed a window and climbed through. It was lucky Sir Mortimer hadn't a pistol handy. After that it was easy enough to get away through the grounds, and next day our man reported at headquarters, bringing these papers with him. But you would have had some difficulty in recognizing in the elegant young man with the Free Forester tie the escaping footman of the night before. Only his bandaged hands, where he had cut himself getting through the window, remained to testify to the hurry of his exit.

"A fortnight later, Brown, he was abominably murdered. Oh, they were clever rogues, I give them credit for that; there was never a hint of foul play. He was found in his own motor-house lying dead with the engine running and the doors closed, asphyxiated by the fumes from the exhaust. Accidental death! —and the usual remarks by the coroner about the folly of running an idle engine in an insufficiently-ventilated motor-house. I tell you I know, Brown—

I know it as well as I know my own name, there was no more an accident than if I had been killed myself to-night. I've no proof—of course I've no proof—but it isn't very difficult to imagine a possible sequence of events: the sudden attack, the victim bound and gagged and left on the motor-house floor, the engine started and the doors shut; and then later the removing of the bonds and leaving the body in a natural position, as if he'd been overcome while doing some odd job about the car. You probably read the case in the papers. Does anything strike you?"

A look of interest came into Peter's face.

"Yes—wait a minute—wasn't it Hangerson, that chap who played for the Gentlemen last year at Lords? Good Heavens! And you mean to say he was the man who—" he stopped abruptly, awed into silence.

Mr. Bridgewater rose heavily and stood with his back to the fireplace.

"I understand from Dick that you are at present in the motor-trade, Mr. Brown?" he said.

Peter nodded. "I am. I own a garage on the Brighton road."

"Think you could drive and look after an Isotta Fraschini?"

"Oh yes—why? Who's got one?"

"Sir Mortimer Drude."

"Sounds thrilling—what do you want me to do—go as his chauffeur?" asked Peter lightly.

"As a matter of fact that is the exact thing we do want you to do," returned the other with a serious face.

Peter gave an incredulous laugh. "You're joking, man?" he declared.

"I'm not joking; I'm making a dead serious proposition. We want a man with certain qualifications to do this job, and Dick Cartwright assures us that you have them. You are a practical air-pilot, and I understand you have had experience with seaplanes——"

"Seaplanes? Good Heavens, what on earth are you talking about?" cried Peter. "Is there a submarine in the show as well?"

"Hardly," returned Mr. Bridgewater with a grin. "Then Dick tells me you were on the stage for a short time."

"I was; but if you and Dick think I'm going to dress up as a motor-driver or an air-pilot or any such tomfoolery, just because a mad scientist has invented television or whatever it is, then you may consider the deal off. I'm a motor-engineer, not a policeman."

He spoke with decision, and Mr. Bridgewater considered him with an indulgent smile. "My dear fellow, if it were only a matter for the police, do you think for a moment we should ask for your help?" He shook his head. "It goes rather deeper than that. Consider what would happen once this secret got into the hands of these people—the cleverest gang of crooks in Europe. Do you suppose for a moment they are offering a round million for a deadly thing like this appears to be, without intending to make some vile use of it, or sell it to someone else who will make some vile use of it? I know the cunning of the breed. Their immediate aim is the lining of their own fat pockets; but it's precious little it'll worry them if Europe gets set by

the ears in the process. And what then? Is the League yet so strong that we can sweep aside the prospect of another war as being outside the range of possibilities?"

Peter leaned forward, and all trace of levity had gone from his voice.

"Another war!" he said with some bitterness. "I wish to heaven the words could be banished from the language. I'm not a pacifist by a long chalk, but if I had my way I'd heavily fine anyone not in the services who so much as mentioned the prospect of another war. Honestly, it makes me tired. There was a man in the club-house at the Polhaven golf-club the other day who assured me in all seriousness that because man was a fighting animal wars would never cease; and he brought out a lot of statistics about the world's birth-rate to prove what would happen in three hundred years' time. Talked about war being the great purifier and ennobler, and said it was Nature's way of readjusting the balance of the population. I don't for a moment go so far as to say there will be no more war; but I do say it will not be for many a long year yet. Civilization hasn't yet forgotten lessons of the last. If the late War proved anything, it proved that all the nations are so economically dependent on one another, that so far as material gain is concerned there's precious little difference between the fruits of victory and the ashes of defeat."

"That's only partly true," Mr. Bridgewater admitted. "In the abstract every nation has for a long time recognized war only as a disagreeable necessity. We all pay lip-service to the ideal of world-peace. But

you've got to remember the curious psychology of a nation: you can't deal with it as if you were dealing with a single intelligent mind. Nations are like crowds; when the passion's in the sense it's out; one whiff of national temper will blow the work of years of calm reflection skyhigh. A little bit of flag-wagging and peace-time arguments go by the board. And look how many more nations there are in Europe to-day than there were ten years ago—each a potential war-maker. I ask you, Brown, are there more than half a dozen nations on the Continent of Europe to-day who would have the moral strength to resist using a weapon that assured world supremacy, were such a one placed within reach? Mind you, a supremacy gained by such means would not last. No nation has ever yet attained to world-power except through the collective will of its people. The advantage gained by such things as death-rays, gas, or freak flying-machines are soon neutralized. Defence, as you know, keeps only a little behind defiance; once the results of the initial surprise have worn off, things have a wonderful way of levelling up. But consider the consequences. Modern civilization is a precariously-balanced affair. It went near to toppling in 1918—we're still wobbling from the shock to-day. Inflict on it such another shock in its present unstable condition, and what would happen? Utter collapse, probably—at any rate, in Europe. The dark ages over again. A desolation and famine too horrible to contemplate, but which we must contemplate if we are going to prevent it. Well, we ask you to help us and try and get to the bottom of the mystery."

"And if I fail?" Peter asked quietly.

Mr. Bridgewater shrugged his shoulders. "Don't let us imagine unlikely and unpleasant contingencies. If you succeed—well, we won't talk reward, but you would be able to ask for practically anything you liked."

Peter shook his head and smiled. "You don't convince me, Mr. Bridgewater. If I thought there was a real possibility of some dreadful secret being launched on Europe, as you suggest, I shouldn't hesitate for a moment, believe me. But what proof have you? You've only got Sir Mortimer Drude's word, and you say he's mad. Suppose he isn't mad, but is carrying out some kind of gigantic bluff on the people he's trying to sell the secret to?"

"In that case Sir Mortimer's remaining tenure of life will probably be short and extremely unpleasant," returned Mr. Bridgewater with a grim chuckle. "But he's not bluffing. He wouldn't be at such pains to get these back if he was," and he tapped his belt.

"He may be mistaken, though. His secret may be quite harmless after all."

"Ah! It may be; but it may not. Are we justified in taking the chance?"

Peter laughed outright. "It's no good, Mr. Bridgewater; I'm sorry, but I'm not convinced. Suppose we adjourn the meeting till morning, shall we? I've got to get up early, remember, I've a long journey to go, and I want to start before seven."

But Mr. Bridgewater only smiled with quiet confidence.

## CHAPTER II

### DOINGS IN THE SMALL HOURS

### (1)

It was ten minutes past two when Peter, having seen his visitor comfortably accommodated on the parlour sofa, at length retired to his room. Slipping off his clothes and donning pyjamas, he did not get into bed, but sat on the edge of it with an unlighted cigarette in his mouth, gazing thoughtfully at the candle. His mind was troubled and confused, and he wanted to sort it into some condition of order before he went to bed.

His refusal to accept Bridgewater's proposal had been bluff, pure and simple. Partly from a certain obstinate disinclination to be forced along a course he disliked, and partly in order to see to what length the other would go in efforts to cajole him, he had affected complete disbelief in the urgency of the suggested expedient. But in his heart of hearts he knew he stood committed. Fantastic and unusual as the story was, it had the ring of truth. Dick Cartwright was not the kind of man to appeal to him for help without just cause. Yet Peter could not help a slight feeling of resentment against him for dropping the bombshell into his tiny garden of contentment. He had been so happy in his work, and his friends, and his games. Looking at it in retrospection he realized what it meant to him. And now he must give all these things

up to embark on an adventure which he knew he would loathe.

He turned the question over in his mind: was he in duty bound to accept? Many men, he knew, would jump at the chance for the sake of the adventure itself. That reason held little appeal for him, but he certainly thought there must be men, trained in the ferreting out of secrets, more competent to undertake the job than himself The mechanical part of the rôle—the driving and looking after the car and so forth—presented no difficulties; but what about the other and more important part? Hangerson, a professional, had failed in this; What were the chances of a mere amateur? Yet Dick Cartwright, no mean judge of men and their capabilities, had thought him not unworthy. It was all very puzzling.

He rose from the bed, and lighting the cigarette, moved to the open window, where he stood with his arms on the sill, looking out over the moonlit landscape. The sight of the river below him brought to his mind the violent attack made on Mr. Bridgewater earlier in the evening, and he wondered what had become of the gang. Probably they were miles away by now. Having failed so completely in their purpose with all the advantages of surprise, it was hardly likely they would linger on in the hope of achieving it now that their intended victim knew of their presence in Tregenneth, and was sure to be on his guard.

The window at which he stood overlooked the road, a thoroughfare bounded on the far side by a low stone wall, beyond which the ground fell steeply to the river. Peter had finished his cigarette and was still ruminating

on the strangeness of his proposed mission when his eye chanced to fall on a green light moving slowly up-stream. As it drew nearer he could see the dark outline of a small boat and hear the faint throb of its engine. Idly wondering who it could be at such an hour, he was watching it when suddenly the light went out, reappeared for a space, and vanished again, only to appear once more for a similar period before it again ceased. Almost immediately it was there again, a mere flicker this time, and Peter suddenly realized it had spelt the letter "G" in the Morse code. As the light continued to wink away he read the message mechanically. It said: *"Going to Creek."*

Peter's heart was beating a shade faster as the green light, shining steadily now, continued up the river. The flashing of a message implied the presence of a recipient—and who, other than himself, was there awake and alert in Tregenneth at that time? Peter had little doubt as to the right answer. And even as the light, having passed the village, began to draw in to the Tregenneth side of the river, he made up his mind as to his course of action. Half a mile above the village was a small inlet, called Benton's Creek, for which the motor-boat was obviously making. Here was an opportunity not to be missed. Since there was no way of avoiding the part Dick Cartwright had cast for him, he might as well start at once—and what better beginning could be imagined than scrutinizing at close quarters the members of the gang with whom he had to deal, while remaining invisible himself? During the fight on the quay he had been unable to gather more than an impression of their appearance,

and he had not even caught a glimpse of Horstman—"the lame one" of Mr. Bridgewater's narrative. Benton's Creek, surrounded as it was by trees, was an ideal spot for such an espionage.

There was no need to rouse Mr. Bridgewater. Hurriedly slipping on some clothes he stole downstairs, and cautiously opened and closed the front door; then he ran swiftly and silently in the direction of the village.

Two minutes after he had gone, a man emerged from the shelter of the wall opposite the cottage, and putting his hands to his mouth, uttered a strange cry, which floated down through the quiet night like the plaintive call of a night-bird. Peter, hurrying through the silent village on noiseless rubbered feet, heard the cry, but being occupied with keeping a wary look-out for lurking members of the gang, he gave no heed to it. He had no reason to suppose that they were familiar with his personal appearance, but he was taking no chances.

Once clear of the village he felt more at ease, for he took a short cut of which he knew his enemies would be ignorant. It led along a deep-rutted lane between high banks which presently became a path that crossed a field to the foot of a little hill with a ruined stone tower on top, like the spike on a policeman's helmet. He reached the top of this hill a little breathless, for he had made good time, and he eagerly scanned the several miles of river up-stream which its height commanded. But there was no sign of any boat. Below him, its shores thickly fringed with trees, lay Benton's Creek. Here, he decided, the motor-boat must be hidden.

He had some anxious moments descending the hill. It was as bare as a new railway embankment, and he was afraid of being seen. Half-way down, as luck would have it, he put his foot in a hole, and ended the descent at a run that nearly brought disaster, his impetus sending him into a tree-trunk with a painful force. In an agony of apprehension he listened, holding his breath. If there was anyone in the creek they certainly heard him.

Came a man's startled voice, low and sibilant. "What's that, Dan?" it demanded.

A peevish voice replied:

"Oh, for cry-sake shut it, can't yer! You give me the ruddy jumps, you do. Scared of a blinkin' 'orse movin' now!"

"That weren't no horse, I know," returned the first. "Shove 'er in a bit, Dan. I'll just 'ave a look——"

"Not in this boat, you won't!" interrupted the other with sudden heat. "I don't shove no boat up to the stage till 'Orstman comes, not for you nor no one. I've 'ad enough trouble with this ruddy engine this trip without startin' 'er up every time you 'ear a ghost. 'Sides, the tide ain't up yet. Chuck them fags over and siddown."

"Horstman said—" began the first speaker.

"I don't care wot 'Orstman said," snapped the irritable one. "I'm in charge o' this boat, not you. Chuck them fags over!"

The other subsided, muttering, and silence descended on the creek. Peter began to pick his way carefully through the trees. Presently he perceived the sheen of water, and a few more stealthy strides brought him

in sight of the small landing-stage. Twenty yards from the shore lay a motor-boat containing two men. One, little more than a lad, sat forward in an alert attitude; the other, presumably the surly Dan, lolled in the stern, cigarette in mouth, and Peter saw a villainous face with a shield over one eye. There was a stretch of mud between the boat and the stage; it would be the best part of an hour, he decided, before there was sufficient depth of water to float the boat alongside. Peter settled himself to wait.

Slowly the night wore on. The men in the boat hardly stirred. Once the younger of the two essayed conversation, only to be immediately snubbed by his morose companion. The moon sank perceptibly lower in the heavens. Silently the tide crept up to the landing-stage, but still the men made no move. At length, when his vigil seemed to have lasted for hours, Peter heard the melancholy call of a night-bird in the distance. The occupants of the boat at once bestirred themselves, the younger busying himself with the anchor-rope, while the peevish Dan, to the accompaniment of much profanity, bent over the engine.

"About time, too," he grumbled, as the engine started with a splutter. "We'll be lucky if we get out o' this before daylight, I tell you. 'Orstman can say what he likes—'ullo," he broke off, staring up the creek. "Wot's all this?"

At the far end of the creek, where the road came down to the shore, a party of men came into sight, and commenced to advance along the path to the stage. Among them strode a huge man with a conspicuous limp, a monstrous bulk of a man who towered above

the others like a damaged battleship amidst a swarm of destroyers. Fascinated by the spectacle Peter did not at once observe the rest; but when at length he took his gaze away from the giant his heart missed a beat with sudden horror, for the others were carrying the limp body of a large man.

"It's Josey!" declared the young man in the boat excitedly.

"Josey be blowed," rejoined Dan, standing up as the boat glided to the stage, "it's Big Pedro. Say, boys, wot's happened?" he called out. "Is he dead?"

"Dead?" answered one of the bearers as they laid down their burden. "Ah, I should think 'e was dead. As mutton."

Stray beams of moonlight filtered through the trees, weirdly freckling the face of the dead man; and Peter saw with inexpressible relief that it was the giant mulatto with whom he had tried conclusions earlier in the evening. For several ghastly moments he had thought it was Mr. Bridgewater.

"Aye, but he gave as good as he got," piped the huge man in a shrill voice that contrasted unpleasantly with his enormous size; "trust Pedro for that. Pity he didn't get the other swine as well, blast his bones. Get him in, boys; we don't want to stop here no longer'n we can help. I suppose you ain't seen no man round 'ere, Dan?" he asked.

"There!" cried the young man in the boat.

"You 'old yer ruddy tongue—'e didn't ask you, did 'e?" answered Dan angrily.

"I only said—" commenced the other.

"Stow it!—who wants to 'ear your opinion,"

retorted Dan. "There wasn't nothing, Mr. 'Orstman. There's been no man 'ere, I'll take my oath."

"Dan couldn't 'ear—'e was half-asleep," said the lad with spirit. "About a hower ago, it was, Mr. 'Orstman . . . . "

"Look 'ere—" began Dan in menacing tones, but the big man interrupted him.

"Well, it don't signify if he ain't here now," he squeaked. "If I got my hands on him I'd tear his eyes out, curse him. Josey here 'ud like to have a word with the swine, too—broke his arm, he did—eh, Josey?"

The miscreant addressed—it was the dago who had tried to slash Peter with a razor—replied with a threat so dreadful that all except the angry Dan laughed loudly.

"Any'ow, we got no time to waste on him now," said Horstman with finality. "We done enough for one night I reckon—leastways, Pedro has. Got those stones, George? Well, chuck 'em in—we'll tie 'em on outside. Get a hustle on, boys."

With a strange sinking of the heart Peter watched them haul the dead body of their fellow-conspirator on board. What was the meaning of these sinister allusions to the dead Pedro?—to whom had he given "as good as he got"? If anything had happened to Mr. Bridgewater while he was away—he clenched his fists at the thought. By Heaven! if there had they should pay for it. If he had to spend a year searching for every member of the gang they should pay.

A wave of anger swept over Peter. He wanted to hurt these men physically, make them suffer, shake them out of their vile complacency. And he was

helpless—absolutely impotent. He had no more chance of injuring those six desperadoes, unarmed as he was, than a fox had of killing a pack of hounds.

And then suddenly Peter grinned faintly as an idea came to him. The men were all aboard now; all except the monstrous Horstman, who had stopped to light a cigar. Peter considered the relative sizes of the boat and its last passenger—and his grin grew wider. It was madness, of course—but how inexpressibly gorgeous if it came off. And assuredly there was no reason why it should not. After all, it was dark under the trees; the boat was a small one for so many passengers; and he was wearing rubbers. And it was only a matter of a thirty-foot sprint to the boat.

The man Horstman probably never knew quite how it happened. He stood on the edge of the wooden stage, tentatively feeling with one foot for the gunwale of the boat. A hand was stretched forth to help him, and he took it. All at once he heard a sound behind him, while simultaneously a hoarse cry of warning came from the boat. Caught in two minds he hesitated, and then tried to step back, tugging furiously at his hip-pocket. But he never had time to draw. Peter's outstretched hands caught him full in the back. There was a crash as twenty stone odd of human flesh fell sprawling athwart the gunwale; and then a mighty splash as the over-loaded boat, tilting up suddenly to an acute angle, flung the whole of its human freight overboard.

. . . . .

Dawn was beginning to lighten the eastern sky as Peter, reaching the village on his return journey,

dropped into a walk. He had run from Benton's Creek, not for fear of pursuit from the dripping gang, but urged on by the dread in his heart. The elation of the glorious moment when he had seen his victims struggling in the shallow water had gone, leaving the fear of what he would find at the cottage.

When he came in sight of it he was partly reassured by a light in the sitting-room window, which was wide open. Now, to reach the front door he had to pass this window, and he naturally looked in. What he saw struck him stiff with horror.

In the room stood three people. One was his landlady, her head and shoulders enveloped in a shawl; she had evidently been weeping, and she was looking pathetically at a short man whom Peter recognized as the local doctor, who lived near by. By the couch, in helmet and unfastened tunic, stood the familiar figure of Police-Constable Trethewy, examining some object like a walking-stick in his hand. A figure lay stretched at his feet—a bulky motionless figure with its boots towards the window. Peter gave it one long fearful look; then he again fixed his gaze on the object held by the constable. This time he recognized it. It was a heavy niblick which usually reposed in his golf-bag in the corner; and on the head and part of the shaft was a dark stain.

(11)

Even in the frightful moment of his discovery Peter realized that he must not enter that room. The consequences of such a step were only too apparent. In

the first place he could do nothing to help: Bridgewater was obviously dead and the vital documents stolen; in the second he clearly foresaw the equivocal nature of his position. What kind of story had he to tell? The truth, to the stolid village constable and the hard-headed country practitioner, would sound like the ravings of a lunatic; the deduction they would draw, with the damning evidence of that golf-stick in front of them, obvious. Nor would they hesitate to act on their conclusions. He was practically a stranger in Tregenneth. Apart from a few fishermen, his landlady, and some members of the golf-club at Polhaven, ten miles away, he knew not a soul in Cornwall. It would be nothing less than the duty of the constable to detain him, if only upon suspicion.

That his detention would only be of short duration he knew; he had not the slightest fear of being unable to prove his innocence, given time. But until his innocence was established in the eyes of the law, even if he were not put to the ignominy of arrest, a watchful eye would indubitably be kept upon his movements, and his liberty of action be curtailed. And at all costs he must keep his freedom if he were to get into touch with Dick Cartwright. He realized that must be his first aim.

While these thoughts flashed through his mind the doctor had been bending over the prostrate figure on the floor; and now he straightened his back and said something in an undertone that resulted in the constable turning to the window. Peter drew away just in time. The voice of Constable Trethewy came from the window:

"Likely he be twenty mile away by now," he remarked.

A woman's voice, his landlady's, said tearfully, "He didn't do it sir—that I do know. There wasn't a kinder nor simpler gentleman you'd ever meet than Mr. Brown. You know that well, Mr. Trethewy. Don't 'e take away a man's character behind's back!"

"I got my duty to do, Mrs. King," returned the constable. "Never spoke tu' chap t'arl meself. He looked a decent well-set-up sort o' chap—I will say that for'm."

"Give me a hand here, Trethewy," said the doctor's voice.

A pause followed, and then the constable's voice again: "It do put me in mind of the War, doctor."

Peter waited to hear no more. It distressed him to leave his landlady to face the music alone, and she standing by him so loyally; but there was no help for it. Some day later he would put things right with her; at any rate, apart from the inevitable trouble and publicity, she would come to no harm.

He started off down the road to the shed where he kept his car—and then he pulled up, swearing under his breath. His keys and all his money were in his bedroom; there was nothing for it but to retrace his steps. Ducking under the open window he found the front door ajar and silently slipped inside. As he tip-toed up the stairs he caught a glimpse of Trethewy busy with a note-book, and he wondered irrelevantly why it was that policemen invariably used such stubby pencils.

Once in his own room he lost no time in slipping into

his pocket such articles as were necessary for his flight; and then, going to the window, he speculated on his chances of jumping down without making too much noise. Better to risk the stairs, he decided; but he regretted his decision a few moments later when, on reaching the bottom step, the burly figure of the constable emerged from the sitting-room.

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" exclaimed that worthy, pressing the back of his neck importantly against the collar of his tunic. "An' where have yu' been arl this time, might I ask?"

Peter thought quickly. Should he affect ignorance of the whole business or tell them the truth—or as much of the truth as was necessary to clear himself? There was no reason why he should encourage them to think him a murderer. At the same time he was certainly not going to allow himself to be detained. On that point he was determined.

"Why, what's the matter—and what are you doing here?" he gasped in what he hoped was a voice of suitable astonishment.

"You'll know soon enough! Going to sneak out, wasn't yu', now?"

Peter's nerves, though he did not know it, were all to pieces, and the man's tone irritated him.

"And what the devil has it got to do with you if I am?" he said angrily. "Do you propose to try and prevent me?"

"Yais!' said Trethewy with a grim nod, and put his broad back against the front door.

It was the constable's complacent assumption of his guilt that made Peter lose his temper. Afterwards

he realized that his action, besides definitely putting him on the wrong side of the law, was stupid and unnecessary; he could so easily have temporized and sought a later opportunity to slip away. Had he taken the wiser course the subsequent trend of this narrative would have been entirely different. But reason is apt to melt in the heat of anger, and Peter's course was the unwise one. He feinted for the constable's jaw, and as Trethewy's arm flew up he smote him on the unguarded mark; the man doubled up involuntarily, and before he could recover Peter was through the door.

He ran down the road as hard as he could go. Daylight was rapidly gaining, and looking back, he saw the heavy figure of the constable lumbering after him. Of the doctor there was no sign. Well, he had not the slightest desire to hurt Trethewy, but he would persist in getting in the way . . . it would be a harder blow next time, he thought grimly.

Reaching the shed he thrust in the key and flung back the doors; then he jumped into the car, switched on, and pressed the self-starter. The engine fired at once, and shoving in first gear, and regardless of the unwisdom of speeding up a cold engine, he trod on the accelerator and let in the clutch. The car lurched forward just as Trethewy appeared at the entrance. Peter steered straight for him: it was the only thing to do, and he knew the constable wouldn't wait to be run over. Trethewy leapt aside with a yell, but as Peter turned into the road he jumped on the running-board—and then, in a ghastly moment for Peter, the engine made a peculiar hissing noise, coughed, and was silent. Well Peter knew that sound—no petrol!

In the excitement of starting he had forgotten to turn the petrol-tap; the amount left in the float-chamber of the carburetter had been sufficient to take him a few yards, but no further.

Whether the constable had his truncheon with him Peter never knew; at any rate he did not use it. Instead, he threw himself on Peter like a tiger and endeavoured to drag him from the driving seat. He was a big strong man, full of righteous anger at the way he had been treated; but then so was Peter. Moreover, Peter was in the finer condition. Out of the car they rolled, twisting and turning, speaking no word, the breath whistling through their lungs as they struggled. There was no question of finesse; it was the old elemental game, man to man, with victory to the strong arm and the quick brain. Trethewy fought desperately; but he was by twenty years the older man, and he began to weaken. Peter felt the lessening resistence and put forth all his strength. And when presently he arose, shaken and panting, it was a senseless figure that lay at his feet.

Stooping, he lifted the inert body of the plucky constable, and with some difficulty carried him to the side of the road. It would take Trethewy about ten minutes, he reckoned, to recover consciousness, and by that time he would be well started on his journey. But how far would he travel before the hand of the law overtook him? Only too well he realized the seriousness of his position. He was no longer an innocent man fleeing from justice; to the crime for which everyone would hold him guilty he had now added that of a murderous assault on the police. No

amount of explanations would palliate that offence. Truly, he reflected bitterly, as he re-started the car, violence always recoils on the head of the violent.

(III)

But with the freshness of the morning, as he bumped along the narrow lanes, his spirits rose. After all, granting the original folly of having assaulted the constable, he did not see how he could have acted differently. He began to think of the future. Obviously he must make some sort of plan. In good open country his car was capable of doing sixty miles an hour; on the Cornish and Devonshire roads he could, he thought, average from thirty-five to forty at that early hour, though it would be bumpy going. In four hours, then, given luck, he would be well into Somerset or Dorset where the roads were better, but where, with the coming of the working day, he would need to be on the alert for those three flies in the speed-merchant's ointment—corners, cross-roads, and cattle. Provided he was not stopped he calculated he would reach London, two hundred and sixty miles away, in the early afternoon. But in the meantime the ether and the telegraph-wires of Great Britain would be humming to the description of a certain yellow two-seater car, driven by one Peter Brown, motor-engineer, aged thirty, in height 6 ft., etc., etc. . .

"The devil!" thought Peter. "It will take some doing!"

Exeter—that bottle-neck to the south of England—it was there he might first meet trouble. Impossible

to avoid that long High Street, with it numerous white-coated policemen, without making a tiresome detour. Better, perhaps, to get rid of the car and go on by train. The risk of detection would be immeasurably less. He would be able to get a much-needed sleep in the train, too, for he was beginning to feel the effects of having stayed up all night. For the present, however, he would have to be content with the car; there would be no train running yet for several hours.

It was a steam-roller, snorting merrily out of a deep-sunk Devonshire side-lane some two or three hours later, that solved the problem of the disposal of the car. The thing happened with that swiftness which characterizes most motor accidents. One moment the speedometer needle was quivering near the fifty-five mark; the next the brakes were squealing a frenzied protest as Peter jammed on everything hard, klaxoning furiously. But the steam-roller kept on its course, completely blocking the highway. Peter had a vision of the scared driver, spinning his steering-wheel like one possessed; then seeing a smash was inevitable he turned the car into the side of the road.

It hit the bank at twenty miles an hour, slithered round, and fell over on its side, pitching its occupant out onto the grass. Rising unhurt his first thought was for the car. It was out of action—he saw that at a glance. The near-side front wing was crumpled up like paper, the wheel beneath being bent at an angle of forty-five degrees.

The steam-roller had stopped, and the driver climbed down from his cabin with an indignant face. He was a little man, and the reaction from the

alarm of the averted collision rendered him abusive.

"Now don't get angry," Peter told him. "It won't do you any good and you are entirely in the wrong. What do you mean by coming out of a side-road like that without knowing the coast was clear?"

"You 'adn't no business to go ser fast. Think you own the ruddy 'ighway, you motorists—'airin' along at that rate!"

Peter looked at his weak, angry face, and realized the uselessness of argument.

"Where's the nearest garage?" he asked, with what patience he could summon.

"You was a-doin' seventy if you was a-doin' ten," declared the man doggedly. "I know! I gotter motor-bike meself. Racin' you was! 'Ow was I to know . . ." And so on, and so forth.

The dispute might have gone on indefinitely had not a commercial traveller in a Ford Sedan driven up, and learning the facts of the case, offered to give Peter a lift to Exeter, whither he was bound. Peter accepted gratefully, and after exchanging names and addresses with the still-simmering driver of the steam-roller, mounted up beside the traveller and ensconced himself between two cardboard boxes and a suitcase.

Shortly after they had started they met two police-men on bicycles, who subjected them to a keen scrutiny, without, however, stopping them. As Peter's companion thoughtfully observed, they seemed to be "on the look-out for somebody". Peter consulted his watch. It was a quarter to eight. Constable Trethewy had apparently not been long in spreading the glad tidings.

## CHAPTER III

### THE GIRL AND THE MOTOR-SCOOTER

### (1)

In Exeter, having parted from the obliging commercial-traveller, Peter took a tram to St. David's station. It marked the terminus of the route, and he was about to descend when the sight of two uniformed constables, lounging outside the station entrance, made him resume his seat somewhat hastily.

There was no reason to suppose that they were there on account of him, but he was hatless and still dressed in the flannel trousers and shabby sports-coat which he had worn at Tregenneth; his damaged eye, in the absence of his glasses, was a fairly conspicuous object; all of which rendered him easily recognizable should his description have already been circulated. The risk, it was true, was only a slight one, but he wished to take no chances. As the tram journeyed back to the centre of the town he told himself he was giving way to panic: that it was absurd to suppose that the machinery of the law could have been set in motion in so short a time. But he changed his mind when, alighting at Queen St., the other of the two main stations in Exeter, the familiar uniform once again met his eye in the booking-hall. The double circumstance was too strange to be a coincidence. It looked as if the task of leaving Exeter was going to prove more difficult than he imagined.

He left the station in a thoughtful mood. The police, he supposed, must have come across the abandoned car, the information of the driver of the steam-roller having done the rest. Probably by now the whole police force of Exeter was in possession of a description of his appearance. It became increasingly evident that if he was going to leave the town by any of the recognized exits—and short of adding to the list of his crimes by stealing a motor-cycle or car he saw no other way—he must adopt some sort of disguise.

Towards this end, the hour being now after nine and the shops open, he paid a visit to a ready-made clothing store, and purchased a suit of reach-me-downs of cheap dark serge, into which he presently changed in a public lavatory. A call at an unpretentious barber's shop in a side-street resulted in the loss of his mustache; then he purchased a road map of Devon, and a quarter of an hour later, equipped with a pair of green-tinted spectacles, shiny black shoes and a bowler hat with a straight brim, he entered the Commercial Room of an hotel and ordered breakfast. No one took any notice of him. With his flowing tie and imitation pearl pin, his well-oiled hair and general appearance of commercial smartness, he might have passed for one of the cheaper kind of travelers in that diversified trade known on the road as "The Rag".

As soon as the meal was over he obtained a time-table. It appeared that there was a train leaving St. David's station at 12.30, which would land him at Paddington at 6 o'clock, and he determined to go by it. In the meantime, as he had nearly two hours to

wait, he decided to try and snatch a little sleep, of which he was beginning to feel strongly in need. Espying a smoking-room which appeared at the moment to be empty, he told the Boots what he proposed to do, and asked him to rouse him half an hour before the train was due to start; then, making his way to a couch, he stretched his tired limbs on it with a feeling of infinite weariness. His body had begun to ache all over, and there was a dull pain in his left shoulder which was the result of his tussle with Constable Trethewy; nevertheless, it was the first peaceful moment he had enjoyed since the episode on the quay at Tregenneth eleven hours before, and he sighed for the sheer delight of it. Five minutes later he was asleep.

* * * * *

Out of the formless land of shadows, that impalpable world of half-impressions that lies between sleep and waking, in which he had yet been dimly aware of some sinister happening that menaced his safety, Peter was jerked, with a suddenness that set all his pulses racing, into complete, panic-stricken wakefulness, with every nerve taut, his whole being alive to the proximity of some imminent danger. Indeed, so real and unmistakable was the warning that, without being conscious of actual volition, he slid his legs from the couch and stood up, gazing fearfully round the empty smoking-room.

And then, just as the memory of a dream, clear enough at the moment of waking, quickly fades under the rush of new perceptions, so the feeling of apprehension began sensibly to diminish. He laughed

uneasily. Nerves—that was what was the matter with him: his cursed imagination was playing him tricks again. It was as well no one else was in the room—a pretty fool he would have looked, starting up like that at nothing. He glanced at the clock on the mantlepiece. It was half-past eleven—there was still time for another forty winks. Determined not to let his nerves get the better of him, he resolutely lay down once more. And as he did so he noticed a curious thing.

In the opposite corner of the room two doors stood close together at right-angles—the one through which he had entered, and another marked "Writing-Room". His eye had chanced to fall on the handle of the former door, and been arrested by the fact that it was being slowly turned from without.

Lying with eyelids almost closed Peter watched the sinister movement: saw the handle become still, and the door begin to open. Then a head was thrust cautiously through the gap. It was that of the commercial-traveller who had given him a lift in his Ford. And his eyes went straight to the couch and stayed there.

There was something unnatural about that scrutiny. It was not as if the intruder had looked in in search of a friend, but rather as if he had come solely to examine the figure on the couch—to identify it, perhaps. The train of thought suggested was disquieting. It looked as though Peter's efforts to evade capture had failed, and his tracks been followed. He continued to lie quite still, while his brain took in this new development.

At length the head was withdrawn and the door softly closed, but not latched; whereupon Peter once more rose, and tiptoeing to the door, peeped through the crack. What he saw confirmed his suspicions, for in the hall of the hotel were two policemen, one evidently a sergeant, talking earnestly to the manager, while the commercial-traveller, a few yards distant from Peter, was beckoning excitedly.

The sight galvanized Peter into violent activity. With a couple of bounds he reached the windows, only to perceive that they looked out upon a busy street, with a white coated policeman directing traffic not a dozen yards away. Obviously there was no escape in that direction, and he promptly flew to the door of the writing-room. Two men were sitting at desks with their backs turned towards him as he entered. They did not look up, and he strolled carelessly to the door, and whipping off his now all too betraying spectacles, walked out into the corridor. He was banking on the hope that the watchers, if he attracted their notice, would be so firmly convinced that he was still asleep in the smoking-room as to mistake him for an ordinary hotel guest.

This was apparently what happened. Peter treated himself to a swift glance up the corridor, to be rewarded with a sight which, in less trying circumstances, would have filled him with laughter. Creeping along on tiptoe towards the smoke-room door with every appearance of stealth, looking ridiculously like stage conspirators, were the sergeant and the constable, followed by the manager and the commercial-traveller. Undoubtedly they saw him emerge from the

writing-room, but Peter was half-way down the corridor, walking as slowly as he dared, before they realized who he was. A sudden shout warned him of recognition; and the next moment, casting aside all pretence, he was sprinting down the corridor, praying that the closed door which faced him at the end did not lead into another room or cul-de-sac.

Reaching it amidst a growing uproar of shouts, he flung it open, and slamming it to again, found himself in the courtyard of the hotel, empty save for a man in brown overalls busy washing down a car near the entrance gates. To pass the man without being seen was impossible, yet there seemed no other way of escape, and Peter was on the point of making the attempt when his eye fell on a wicker skip or case, such as travellers carry samples in, standing open against the wall by the side-door—and it was empty! In an instant Peter was inside with the lid down, just before the hotel-door burst open, and the chase cascaded noisily into the courtyard.

Peter would have enjoyed the scene which followed if he had not been so desperately anxious as to its outcome. For a few minutes there was nothing but the sound of men running about and voices raised in excited comment and inquiry, dominated by the parade-ground bark of the sergeant. He seemed to be a man of explosive temper. Peter imagined him as being thick of jaw, with choleric, protruding eyes—as, indeed, he was.

"Where in Hades is he!" he cried. "Talk about thick heads—God bless my soul, you've got eyes in your head, man haven't you?—you must have seen

him come out!"—this, presumably, to the man in brown overalls.

"I didn't see no one," the unfortunate man returned surlily. "How could I, with me back turned and all?"

"I don't want none of your sauce," retorted the sergeant. "A little more lip from you, cocky, and you'll find yourself in trouble! Any other exits bar them gates, sir?" he demanded of the manager.

"Not unless he climbed the wall," was the reply. "It's me belief he's hiding somewhere in those old stables yonder."

"We'll soon find out. Edwards, you stop by them gates. Now, sir, *if* you please."

The next half-hour was one that was long remembered by the hotel management and staff. The day had become uncomfortably hot, as the result of which tempers were already in a sensitive condition and the sergeant's energy, as he raged about like an angry lion, did nothing to soothe them. In his zeal he peered under motor-cars; he climbed into disused lofts; he insisted on having two lock-up garages unlocked; he entered the stock-room of a traveller in lady's lingerie and outraged the indignant salesman by feeling into a large case of his daintiest wares with hands soiled by a previous visit to the coal-hole. Yet it never occurred to him, or to anyone else, to look into that much more obvious case by the side-door. Finally, he invaded the servants' quarters, which were on the ground floor at the back of the hotel.

And it was while he was there, engaged in a passionate altercation with an irate elderly female cook who resented his declared intention of searching her bedroom

as a slur on her good character, and whose name and address were duly taken by the furious sergeant as the result, that Peter for the first time dared to raise the lid of his hiding-place.

"Holy Moses!" he gasped. "Talk about the Black Hole of Calcutta!"

He looked round the yard. The man in the brown overalls was lying half-under the car; the other men had gone to their dinner; the manager and the obliging traveller were nowhere to be seen. Only one policeman stood between him and freedom. It was a case of now or never.

Leaping from the skip he rushed to the gateway. The constable saw him coming, and made a gallant attempt to grapple him; but with the experience born of many runs on the rugby field Peter handed him off, and raced down the street like a hare, with the policeman, vigorously blowing his whistle, after him.

Fortunate it was for Peter that it was the dinner-hour and there were few people about, or his period of freedom would have been short. As it was, the only person to attempt to stop him was an old lady with an umbrella, which she valiantly brandished in front of him as if he were a runaway sheep. Dodging her, he slipped down a side-road; and running as fast as he could lay foot to ground, he reached the end of it just as the pursuing constable hove in sight. It was a comparatively easy matter to avoid the chase then; and presently he dropped into a walk. And soon afterwards, coming upon a field with a gate which bore the legend "The Chavverton Croquet Club", and seeing no one about, he slipped through, and

finding a large tree in one corner, lay down in its grateful shade to take stock of his position. The problem of reaching London was going to prove less easy than he had thought. It looked as if he would have to wait until darkness before he attempted to leave Exeter.

(ii)

The Rev. Charles Barkleigh-Claughan was winning his game. As he strode about the croquet-lawn, bare-headed and in his shirtsleeves, his face glowed with pleasure and perspiration. It always afforded him keen delight to beat Rear-Admiral Bodmin, the best player in the club, for the old sailor's dislike of coming off second-best was notorious. Whenever the clergyman made a particularly long break the Admiral's frown, always formidable, would have been terrifying to anyone but his opponent, who was not easily intimidated. Finally, when Mr. Barkleigh-Claughan had ended the game by pegging out both his own balls, the Admiral gave tongue.

"It's outrageous!" he declared explosively, "it's positively a disgrace!"

"What is that, Admiral?" asked the young clergyman innocently.

"The state of this lawn, sir! If I had my way the groundsman should be strung up at the end of a yard-arm. The ground isn't fit to play polo on, let alone croquet. It's like the present condition of this country, sir—a damned disgrace to those who are supposed to look after it."

"Oh, come, Admiral," said the clergyman. "I

thought you were playing rather well. You had most atrocious bad luck, you know. That last shot of yours, for instance. Dead on all the way it was, until the last moment."

But instead of appeasing him, as Mr. Barkleigh-Claughan hoped, this commiseration served only to raise the Admiral's ire.

"Exactly, sir! Precisely what happened!" he barked. "It was entirely the fault of the ground. One might as well play croquet on a ploughed field. I shall make it my duty to lodge a complaint with the Committee."

Saying which Admiral Bodmin bit furiously into a new cigar and stumped off to the pavilion. The clergyman sighed, and knocking about a ball or two, mopped his glistening brow.

"Wouldn't care for your revenge, I suppose?" he said casually to the indignant sailor, who was changing his shoes on a small chair in front of the pavilion.

The Admiral, struggling hard to get a hot foot into an obstinate shoe, breathed heavily without replying, whereupon Mr. Barkleigh-Claughan repeated his request.

"Sure you wouldn't care for another game?" he said insinuatingly.

For answer the Admiral gave a savage tug at the shoe, but his hand slipped, and with the sudden movement he lost his balance and rolled completely off the chair. Mr. Barkleigh-Claughan hastily turned his shaking shoulders to the pavilion.

But he again sighed regretfully when the Admiral had left. These elderly men with livers were very

trying. He had hoped to play croquet for another hour at least, and there was no other member on the ground.

And then his eyes fell with some surprise on the figure of a man walking past the end of the lawn—a complete stranger, dressed in blue serge and wearing tinted spectacles. It occurred to the clergyman to ask him what he was doing there, but being a companionable soul he nodded instead, and remarked: "Hot, isn't it?"

"It is," agreed the stranger. "Nice, though."

"Oh, rather; I'm not complaining," returned the clergyman. "New member?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact I came here to find a man," was the reply. "A man named Smith; but he doesn't seem to be here."

"Smith, the accountant, do you mean? He only comes here on Saturdays."

"No, my Smith is—a doctor."

"No doctor of that name here," the curate informed him. "You must have made a mistake."

"I'm afraid I must have," confessed the stranger. "What a jolly little club you have here."

"Yes, isn't it! By the way, I suppose you—er—you don't happen to be a croquet-player?" asked the clergyman tentatively.

"Well, I used to play a bit some years ago. You fond of it?"

"I love it," said the Rev. Charles Barkleigh-Claughan. "Greatest game out—for the summer. You don't spend half your time in the pavilion like you do at cricket, and it's nothing like so maddening as golf,

when you reach the green in two and take four more to hole out. Trouble is it's so dashed unpopular. In novels and things. The only writer I know who really appreciates it is Chesterton. Ever read that little thing of his on croquet? 'The game which is no game' or some such title. How he played in the dark and kept hitting balls he couldn't see . . . jolly true, too. I suppose you wouldn't care for a game yourself?" he suggested.

The stranger's gaze rested thoughtfully on the distant figure of a policeman walking slowly and majestically past the railing that separated the field from the road. "I should like one very much," he said. "Only I'm afraid I shouldn't be able to give you much of a game."

"Splendid!" cried the clergyman. "As a member I enjoy the privilege of inviting a friend to play. You can borrow the Admiral's shoes and mallet—he won't know, and if he did it couldn't make him madder than he was five minutes ago. Come in."

"I like your pavilion," observed the stranger, glancing over the box-like structure. "Nice and compact."

"Yes, isn't it? It was once a kiosk at some open-air exhibition or other, and we picked it up for an old song. It hasn't got a window—still, it suffices, and the door is strong enough."

"It locks, I suppose?" the stranger asked carelessly.

"Oh, yes, rather. We couldn't leave all these things lying about without. I'll get the book and put your name down."

The clergyman disappeared inside. The stranger

glanced back at the policeman, now safely past the gate; then his eye came back to the clergyman's hat and coat, which were lying on a chair, and from there travelled to a bicycle leaning against the pavilion, presumably belonging to the clergyman also. Then, feeling an utter cad, he stepped to the door and turned the key.

"Hello, what's up?" came the clergyman's voice from the pavilion, and the stranger heard him trying the door. "Here, I say!" he protested.

"I'm really awfully sorry!" said the stranger apologetically. "I assure you I wouldn't do this if it was not absolutely necessary. I hope you don't mind if I borrow your clothes."

"Borrow my clothes—what do you mean? Unlock this door."

"I haven't the time to explain, but when you know the circumstances—"

"What the deuce do you mean?" the clergyman interrupted angrily. "Let me out at once, do you hear?"

The stranger had already removed his collar and put it on back to fore, and he now slipped on the clergyman's hat and coat, and seized hold of his bicycle.

"I'll get someone to let you out," he called. "I'm leaving you my coat; it's a nice new one, I only bought it this morning. Good-bye. I'm so sorry to be so rude, but you'll understand some day. I'll send the bike back if I can."

To the accompaniment of a thunderous banging on the door the stranger wheeled the bicycle into the

road. On the footpath was a small boy with a dirty face, and the stranger felt in his trouser pocket and produced a coin.

"Like to earn sixpence, sonny?" he said pleasantly. "You see that pavilion over there—well, there is a friend of mine, a very angry gentleman, locked inside. You can hear him talking to himself if you listen, but he's quite harmless really. Run and let him out and the sixpence is yours. Or better still," added the stranger with a sudden grin. "Run to that policeman and ask him to let him out. It'll make him happy for days to think he's been so near to me without knowing it."

So saying he mounted the bicycle, and overtaking the policeman, graciously saluted him, to receive a dignified salute in return.

"Nice fellers, them curates," was the mental comment of the constable as he watched the cyclist disappear; but whether this attitude of mind survived the next half-hour, when he discovered that the curate who had given him such an affable salutation was none other than the man for whom half the county was looking, history does not relate.

## (iii)

Picture now the spectacle of our Mr. Brown, strangely clad in clerical coat and collar and blue serge trousers, toiling along the Taunton road through that hot afternoon on a bicycle several sizes too small for him, tired in body, the calves of his legs already beginning to ache from the unaccustomed exercise, but in great

spirits on account of his lucky escape from Exeter. Since leaving the town cars had passed him in plenty, travelling in both directions, but as none had shown the least interest in him he was full of hope that he had eluded the police for good.

It would take them the best part of an hour, he calculated, to identify the miscreant in the hotel with the stealer of the clergyman's bicycle, and by that time he reckoned to have put many miles between himself and Exeter. To remain long on the main-road, however, was asking for trouble: and when, shortly, he came to the summit of a hill which commanded a wide prospect of the vale through which the road travelled, he dismounted and brought out his map. He had a plan in mind. The hill on which he stood was, roughly, the center of a circle twelve miles in radius in which there were about a dozen railway-stations, from one of which he was convinced he would be able to catch a local train and make his way to one of the larger towns, and thence to London. There was obviously a limit to the number of police who could be spared to join in the search, and the risk of being discovered at a wayside station seemed less than that of trying to get a lift in a passing car, the driver of which might easily have been warned to be on the look-out for him. Accordingly, therefore, he mounted his machine, and a few minutes later, coming upon a side-road with a finger-post bearing the name of one of the villages with a station, he turned down it. As he did so the thought occurred to him that he could not be far from Okewood Hall, the residence of Sir Mortimer Drude. Mr. Bridgewater had omitted

to name its exact locality, for the necessity had not arisen; but Peter had gathered that it lay in a region to the north-east of Dartmoor. He made a mental note to inquire if it was anywhere near, should the opportunity arise.

It struck him that thunder was about. As he followed the winding course of the lane, now plunging through a tunnel of green foliage to cross a tiny bridge over a stream that tinkled pleasantly in the oppressive heat, now topping the rise of a hill that opened up extensive views of the rich Devon landscape, it seemed to him that over everything there hung that ominous stillness which generally precedes a storm. He rather hoped the weather was breaking up, and that it would rain hard—anything to damp the ardour of the police. And then, on a bend in the lane, he came upon the motor-scooter.

It stood temptingly by the side of the road in front of a cottage, a squat, ugly-looking machine with small wheels; and there was no one in charge of it. Here was a Heaven-sent gift. The rights and wrongs of stealing something which did not belong to him failed to trouble him at the moment. Larger issues than the loss of a motor-scooter depended on his movements within the next few hours; indeed, he would have stolen a motor-car if one had been handy. So, with a quick glance about him, he dismounted, and leaning his bicycle against the wall in front of the cottage, he laid hands on the scooter and kicked up its tiny stand. And as he was about to push it off a girl came out of the cottage—a tall girl, straight of limb and body, who moved with the supple grace of an athletic boy.

"Oh, but—excuse me, please, that's mine," she protested, and came quickly through the garden-gate with a resolute face. Then, confronted by a clergyman, she stopped in some perplexity.

Peter raised his hat and smiled. "Madam, I am aware of it, and I apologize. I admit I was about to steal it without a by-your-leave, and I therefore humbly ask you—may I borrow it?"

Her expression of perplexity deepened. "Yes, of course," she said hesitatingly. "Take it by all means," and she ran her dark brown eyes over his attire. "Someone is ill, I suppose?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I can't even plead that," said Peter with a twisted smile. "I am not even a clergyman. On the contrary, I am a criminal fleeing from justice."

She looked at his ingenuous face, sunburnt and comely except for the disfiguring scar over one eye, and she felt a sudden desire to laugh. Anyone less like a criminal in appearance she had seldom seen.

"It sounds interesting," she said composedly. "All the same I don't see why you should steal my scooter."

He made a grimace of resignation. "I see I shall have to explain. I am supposed to have murdered a man in Cornwall last night, and early this morning I committed a foul and unprovoked assault on a constable. Since then I have assaulted another constable in Exeter, and had the misfortune to steal a suit of clothes and this bicycle from a parson. Even at this moment stout and perspiring policemen are climbing into Ford cars in order to get on my tracks. And yet I assure you I am entirely innocent. Do you believe me?"

During this recital her face had gradually softened, and at its conclusion she laughed outright.

"You poor man," she cried. "Of course I believe you. But why do you run away if you are innocent?" she asked seriously.

"Why?" He gave a gesture of mock despair. "Because, my dear lady, I have a deep-rooted objection to spending the night in Exeter gaol, or wherever it is they put wicked malefactors nowadays. I want to enjoy the country while I can—Devon—England——

> "Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
> And laughter, learnt of friends; and, gentleness
> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

"I beg your pardon," he ended lamely. "I'm afraid the sun must be getting to my head. Only the very best criminals quote poetry, and I'm only a bungling amateur. I can imagine my friend Horstman spouting Keats by the hour."

He had spoken lightly, and she had listened with a half-smile on her lips; but at the word "Horstman" her face changed as though she had been struck, and the colour slowly drained from her cheeks.

"Horstman," she said in a low voice. "You know him?"

"Intimately enough to have been the means of giving him a good ducking," returned Peter dryly. "He's not a friend of yours, I hope? A nasty fellow with a carcass like a bull and a squeaky voice."

She had regained her self-possession and some of her colour.

"Tell me exactly what happened," she demanded.

He looked at her curiously. "You don't happen to

know the fellow really, do you?" he asked. Probably, he reflected, she had met the brute somewhere in the neighbourhood, for if all Mr. Bridgewater had told him were true, nothing was more likely than that he had been in the habit of visiting Okewood Hall. He was conscious of a certain thrill of indignation at the thought that a girl like this should ever have been brought into contact with a blackguard of Horstman's character.

In reply to his question she nodded. "Tell me what happened," she repeated.

"There isn't very much to tell," he said carelessly. "Mr. Horstman and some friends of his happened to annoy me in a certain way, and the opportunity presenting itself for me to annoy him, I took advantage of it. To be exact, I pushed him into the river."

"You didn't!" she cried, beating her hands together in a sudden ecstasy. "Oh, how lovely." Then, her eyes narrowing, she added viciously, "I hope you hurt him."

"I'm afraid it was only his dignity that suffered," said Peter sorrowfully. "I rather gather that you don't like him," he went on. "Will you think me curious if I ask you where you met the charming gentleman?"

She laughed evasively. "I met him at a friend's house."

"It must have been a jolly party. The sight of Horstman in the drawing-room, balancing a teacup on one knee and a plate on the other, must have been worth seeing. By the way," Peter added carelessly, "Do you happen to know where Okewood Hall is, where Sir Mortimer Drude, the scientist, lives?"

"Oh, yes," she answered composedly. "It was at his house that I met Mr. Horstman. It's about four miles from here."

At that moment a motor-horn of a peculiar penetrating note sounded some distance away, and the girl started as if she had been stung. She looked round wildly, all her colour gone again in a trice.

"Quick!" she cried. "Take this—oh, don't stop to ask why, but take it! Get right away from here—at once!"

He looked at her in amazement. "But why—?" he began, when she interrupted him fiercely, stamping her foot.

"Do as I say! Oh, hurry, you fool—hurry!"

A great suspicion, born of something Mr. Bridgewater had told him, took possession of Peter. The horn sounded again, nearer this time. After a moment of hesitation he caught hold of the scooter by the handlebars. Then he turned once more to the girl.

"Before I go," he said, meeting fully the anxious gaze of her dark eyes. "Won't you tell me your name?"

A faint flush crept into her cheeks. "Jane," she said, "Jane Smith."

"Thank you," said Peter. "Mine is Brown—Peter Brown."

And with that he lifted the valve release lever and ran the machine along the ground; the engine fired with a loud explosion; and the next instant, with a noise like a small quick-firing gun, the motor-scooter was streaking up the lane with Peter on its running-board, while from somewhere behind, clearly audible above the roar came the ominous note of the motor-horn.

(IV)

In the lane, or rather in that part of it where the following scene was enacted, the predominating feature was dust. It lay on the ground in miniature mountain-ranges where cart-wheels had pressed it aside; it tinted the green of the tall hedges and the long grass at the side with grey. A haze that was visible only at a distance had arisen and partially veiled the sun, whose white glare had given place to a blazing disc; and strangely enough the veiling process seemed to intensify rather than diminish the heat. So oppressive was the atmosphere that one might have imagined there was an actual physical presence, infinitely great, brooding over the scene. And the quiet was such that when at long intervals there came the low growl of distant thunder the sound was like a menace.

Presently another sound emerged from the stillness; a far-away but insistent throbbing that grew steadily louder until, with a roar, a squat, ugly machine, with a man standing on it, came rapidly into view round a bend of the road, followed by a dense cloud of dust.

Down the lane it came at great pace, filling the air with its hideous noise. And then—something happened. The roar suddenly ceased; simultaneously the front wheel of the machine seemed to stop still for an infinitesimal moment, tipping up at the back and shooting the rider forward over the handlebars as if he had been discharged from a catapult, so that he fell all of a heap, rolled over and lay still, his limbs sprawled out like a starfish. The dust slowly settled.

A few minutes later a motor-horn sounded, and a

limousine swept round the bend at speed, only to pull up suddenly with squealing brakes. Two men got out, one tall and spare, with white hair and pale, ascetic features, the other enormously bulky and walking with a limp, and they approached the prostrate figure in the roadway. But before they could reach him a girl had sprung from the car and, overtaking them, had stooped down and raised his head, gazing fearfully at the closed eyes and blood-stained cheek.

The white-haired man looked down at her with an expressionless face.

"I must confess, Una, that your conduct sometimes causes me a little surprise," he said dryly. "It would almost appear as if my wishes went for nothing. Since this unfortunate young man seems to have stolen your machine, may I ask why you did not at once inform me?"

His eyes, pale as marble, fixed themselves coldly on her troubled face, as without waiting for her reply, he went on: "I understand now why you suggested that we should go home by another route. I presume he imposed on your good-nature by some credulous tale or other. As it happens no great harm is done, but if through your connivance I had missed him, I rather think, Una, we might have had a slight disagreement. I suppose this is the fellow, Horstman?" he added, turning to his huge companion.

"I never set eyes on him meself," piped the giant in his queer falsetto voice. "If it is him I'll have a word to say to him on me own account, curse him! And so would some of the boys—he broke Josey Gomez's arm. Is the young swine dead?"

"Permit me, my dear Una," said the other, gently

moving the girl aside, and he proceeded to make a swift examination of the unconscious man. At length he stood up. "I am afraid you will be disappointed, Horstman," he observed. "He is not only alive, but very little damaged. I have no doubt that he will come to his senses before long."

"What are you going to do with him?" demanded the girl.

"We will offer him the hospitality of Okewood Hall," the white-haired man returned with a singular smile on his thin lips. "Such a resourceful young man deserves the greatest care and attention. Bring him into the car, Horstman."

The girl watched the huge man with an angry glint in her dark eyes as he stooped, and, picking up the limp body, bore it to the car. Twice she seemed on the point of uttering a vehement protest, but each time she refrained as if conscious of the fact that it would not be of the slightest use.

"Perhaps, Una," remarked the white-haired man, when the car started again, with Horstman beside the chauffeur and the still unconscious victim of the accident stretched on the seat in front of him and the girl, "perhaps it might amuse you to read this."

He handed her an early edition of an evening newspaper, folded back at the following:

CORNISH OUTRAGE

MAN BRUTALLY ATTACKED IN COTTAGE
FAMOUS RUGBY INTERNATIONAL DISAPPEARS
THRILLING CHASE OVER TWO COUNTIES

A shocking discovery, involving a well-known rugby-footballer, was made in the early hours of this

morning at a cottage in Tregenneth, Cornwall. Mr. P. J. Brown, the footballer in question, had, it appears, been holidaying at Tregenneth, lodging with a Mrs. King, who was awakened about four o'clock this morning by hearing a noise in her front parlour. Descending to investigate she was horrified to find a man lying in a pool of blood with terrible injuries about the head. Mr. Brown was nowhere to be seen, nor, when she visited his room, had the bed been slept in.

Mrs. King states that the injured man, whose life is despaired of, is an entire stranger to her.

P. C. Trethewy and Dr. Armitage were at once summoned to the spot, which showed signs of having been the scene of a severe struggle. While making their examination they were suddenly surprised by Brown, who, it is supposed, had been concealed on the premises and violently assaulted. Brown, a man of powerful physique, is reported to have first attacked Dr. Armitage, knocking him down, and although P. C. Trethewy made a gallant attempt to arrest him, he was unable to prevent his escape.

Brown then, it seems, made for a shed where he kept his motor-car, and was on the point of leaving when P. C. Trethewy, who had followed him, again made a plucky attempt to detain his man, only to receive several violent blows in the face, which had the result of partially stunning him. Brown was thus enabled to effect a complete get-away. When last seen he was heading in the direction of Bodmin.

The ex-international was next heard of near Okehampton, in Devon, where, between seven and eight o'clock, he had a narrow escape of colliding with a steam-roller. In an endeavour to avoid the steam-roller Brown, who from all accounts must have been travelling at a terrific speed, ran into the bank, severely damaging his car, but without, apparently, receiving any injuries himself. He was given a lift into Exeter by Mr. James Nolan, a commercial-traveller, who, of course, had no knowledge as to the identity of his passenger, who has not been seen since.

P. J. Brown is, of course, the well-known rugby

wing three-quarter whose famous try against Wales at Swanport in 19.., the only try scored in the match, will long be remembered by followers of the handling code. He received a D.S.O. and M.C. for services during the War, since when he has been engaged, we understand, in the motor industry. He stands 6 feet high, is well-built with a bronzed complexion, wears glasses, and has an artificial eye, the result of a war-time injury. When last seen he was wearing a tweed coat and grey flannel trousers.

LATER

It is reported that Brown has been seen in George Street, Plymouth, wearing the uniform of a petty-officer in the Navy. The police are making inquiries.

The girl handed back the newspaper with a weary smile.

"I suppose it's all true," she sighed unhappily. "But he never did it—I'm sure he never did it."

"I wonder," said her companion with an enigmatic smile. "I wonder."

"You won't—give him up to the police?"

"No," was the thoughtful reply. "I don't think, my dear Una, you may have any apprehension on that score."

And his cold eyes rested meditatively on the unconscious figure in front of him.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOME ADVANTAGES OF A THUNDERSTORM

(1)

A BUMP on the head is an unpleasant business. When Peter first opened his eyes following his mishap on the motor-scooter, he was forced to close them again hurriedly, while great waves of pain surged through

his head. For a while he lay still, trying to think, his whole being concentrated on the intolerable torment in his head, inside which a great wheel was rotating with nauseous and maddening deliberation. Gradually the pain became more bearable, and he opened his eyes again, to realize that he was lying fully dressed on a bed in a room. He tried hard to think where he was. This was never the bedroom in which he had gone to sleep at Tregenneth the night before. Indeterminate memories rose in his mind, of a fight in the dark and a big fat man, mingling with others, of a girl with dark eyes, who seemed to be riding along a lane, unaccountably mounted on a croquet-mallet. He groped feebly for the thread which would lead him through this dark mental labyrinth to light and recollection, until his brain ached again with the effort, but there was nothing now but two dark eyes, brown and enormous, that stared at him unwinkingly. . . .

And suddenly, like a blurred picture on a screen which is moved into focus, the incidents which had led up to his present position leaped into his memory. The escape from the hotel, the appropriation of the curate's bicycle, the meeting with the girl of the motor-scooter and the subsequent driving of the abominable thing along the bumpy lane—he remembered them all, even to a fleeting reminiscence of the fatal moment when the machine went wrong. The wretched engine must have seized, he supposed, tipping him over the handlebars onto his head.

He wondered how long he had lain there, and glanced at the watch on his wrist, only to find it broken, the hands having stopped at a quarter to five. The

sky, visible through the window, however, presented much the same appearance as before the accident, and he was convinced it was still the same day. Twisting his head he looked around the room, and was surprised to find he was alone. He lay for some time puzzling over this fact. Presumably he had been brought to the house or hospital or whatever it was, after having been picked up unconscious, and it was surely usual under such circumstances for someone to remain beside him. He also had the idea that ordinarily he would have been put inside the bed instead of on it. There was something strange in his being left alone like this fully dressed—or was it perhaps that he wasn't so seriously hurt as he imagined?

With an effort he sat up and slid his legs over the side of the bed. The movement made the room swim round, but he persevered, and by holding on to the foot of the bed he raised himself unsteadily to his feet. Then, with the gait of a drunken man, he went to the door and tried to open it. It was locked.

That settled it, thought Peter. They were keeping him prisoner until the police arrived. With a feeling of resignation he lay down once more on the bed. He had tried his utmost, but circumstances had been too strong for him. There was nothing more to be done. He felt as if there was no fight left in him. His head was still sore; the wheel went on turning in his brain. He closed his eyes in utter weariness and dejection of spirit; and presently sleep came.

. . . . .

He was awakened by a hand shaking his arm and started up to find a man bending over him, a burly

fellow with "pug" written all over him. He carried some clothes over one arm.

"The Guv'nor says you're to put these on," he ordered shortly.

Peter stared at him in surprise, and then at two other men standing nearer the door. Night had fallen, and the electric light was switched on, plainly revealing all three; and not one bore the least resemblance to a policeman.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Never you mind," said the bruiser. "You got to put them togs on."

"What for?"

"Do what he tells you and don't talk," put in one of the men sharply.

"I'll do anything you like in reason if you'll tell me who you are and where I am," said Peter. "You're the police, I suppose?"

"Police!" The bruiser gave a contemptuous grunt. "You jest nip into them togs and don't ask no questions."

"And get a move on," added the man who had spoken before. "We're not going to wait here all night."

"Your consideration overwhelms me," murmured Peter. "I begin to think you aren't the police at all."

"What you think and don't think doesn't matter" retorted the man. "Please yourself whether you undress yourself or force us to make you. The point is Sir Mortimer has given his orders that you're to wear these clothes, so if you're wise you won't give any trouble."

Sir Mortimer! It needed every atom of self-control of which Peter was capable to refrain from showing how deeply the mention of this name affected him. He was a prisoner in the house of Sir Mortimer Drude, the very man whose secret he was pledged to try and discover! How this extraordinary practical joke on the part of providence had been brought about he had no conception, but the possibilities which it at once suggested were so vast that he found difficulty in collecting his thoughts. The one obvious course, whether Sir Mortimer regarded him as an enemy or whether he was merely keeping him until the police arrived, was to provoke as little trouble as possible.

"Anything you jolly well like," he said resignedly.

As soon as the change had been effected the bruiser gathered the clergyman's clothes in his arms and left the room. The two others produced pistols.

"Follow me," directed the one who had spoken before, "and kindly remember that my friend will be immediately behind you. So if you have any hankerings after eternity all you have to do is try to escape. Going to come quietly?"

Peter laughed and stood upright. Already he was feeling better, and he was full of intense curiosity to know what was going to happen next.

"My dear old friend, I wouldn't attempt anything for worlds while you're pointing those nasty things at me," he replied pleasantly. "They won't go off, will they?"

"They will if you don't behave yourself," returned the other grimly, as he opened the door.

Peter followed him along a carpeted corridor, and

up a flight of stairs, the other man all the time remaining close at his heels. Yet another flight of stairs was negotiated before his guide spoke again; and then, at the end of a narrow passage, he unlocked a door and threw it open.

"In there, please," he ordered.

There was no light in the room, and Peter hesitated, fearing some trick.

"My dear chap," he protested, "I never did like the dark——"

"No words—get in," interrupted the man.

Peter eyed him. He was a wiry man, with long arms; his companion, too, looked quite capable of holding his own in a rough-and-tumble; moreover, both were armed. The odds were absurd. With the merest shrug of resignation Peter passed through the door.

"I might add," came the unpleasant voice of his guide, "that I shall remain outside your door all night. So no tricks."

And the door was shut on impenetrable darkness and the key turned.

. . . . . .

A young man dressed in clerical garb, in whom the casual observer might have traced a general resemblance to Peter, was bidding a grateful farewell to Sir Mortimer Drude in the hall.

"I can assure you, sir, I shall never forget your kindness," he said, as he wrung his host's hand—and even his voice was not unlike Peter's. "You've been most generous, and without your help I don't know what I should have done."

Sir Mortimer gravely inclined his white head.

"My young friend, why thank me? Believe me, I am doing no more than indulge my whim. Circumstances have contrived to place you in a peculiarly false position, and I see no reason why I should supply the deficiencies of the law by handing you over to the police, especially as I am assured you are entirely innocent. Miles will take you in the car and drop you anywhere you may choose, and I can only hope and trust that our rather stupid but well-meaning police will cease to trouble you any further. Good-bye and good luck to you, my boy."

"Good-bye, sir, and again—thank you!"

Sir Mortimer waited until the door closed behind the young man, and was turning thoughtfully away when a girl came out of a room and seized him impulsively by the arm.

"You dear old thing—thanks so much," she said, with a happy smile. "I knew you wouldn't ever give him up to the police. Was his head all right?"

His cold face softened a little as he looked down at her and gently stroked her hair.

"Of course it was, dearest," he answered. "Do you imagine I would let him go away otherwise?"

"I think it's splendid of you. I only hope the police won't find out. It might be rather awkward if they did, mightn't it?"

He laughed quietly and shook his head. "The police will not find out," he assured her. "You must remember, too, dear, that in sending him away I am acting partly in my own interests. You forget our friends arrive to-night."

"You mean Kreller and Pagleiro?" she nodded. "What time?"

He glanced at his watch. "About twelve. And—er—Una—I may have to show them one or two experiments——"

"What—to-night?" she interrupted.

"Quite possibly," he nodded. "It would be unwise for them to stay here too long and they may be gone by morning. So if you hear any strange noises in the night—you won't be alarmed, dear?"

She shivered a little. "I shan't hear any. I hate them both, and Mr. Horstman, too. Uncle, don't you think—" she hesitated, a curious look in her eyes. "Can't we go away, just you and me, and forget all about these people for a little while? I don't mean Sark—we seem to meet more people there than we do here—but can't we have a long holiday together, just ourselves, away from all this—" She made a little grimace of distaste. "Oh, everything here!"

He appeared to be examining the nails of his long white fingers.

"We may have to leave Okewood Hall sooner than either of us imagine," he said reflectively. "Come, let us go into the library. You shall read to me from that new book of Walter de la Mare which arrived to-day."

(ii)

Meanwhile, seated on the bare floor with his back to a wall in complete darkness, our Mr. Brown was going through the process of trying to keep up his spirits in face of the gloomy outlook which the future

seemed to hold. For the prospect, it could not be denied, was anything but cheerful. Not only was he a prisoner in Sir Mortimer Drude's hands, but it also looked as if the scientist was aware of the part he had played in preventing Mr. Bridgewater from falling into the clutches of Horstman and his gang. The uncompromising behaviour of the men from whom he had just parted left no doubt in Peter's mind that it was not in order that he might be handed over to the police that he had been brought to this garret of a room. He had a shrewd suspicion that Sir Mortimer had ordered him to be taken there for purposes of his own; and if all Mr. Bridgewater had told him about the owner of Okewood Hall were true, those purposes were likely to prove interesting.

Whether Sir Mortimer had any knowledge of the mission which Mr. Bridgewater had projected he did not of course know, but the circumstances of his present position rendered any further consideration of that plan futile. Even if he was able to escape from the awkward situation in which he now found himself, he would never now be able to take a position as chauffeur in Sir Mortimer's household. On the other hand he had most miraculously been permitted to enter Okewood Hall, which was undoubtedly a definite step in the right direction; though whether he would ever have the opportunity to take advantage of it was uncertain. Sir Mortimer might, even now, hand him over to the police in the morning; in which case Dick Cartwright would have to look for a new agent. Yet if he was to be handed over to the mercies of the law, why had not the police been informed already?

There had been ample opportunity to 'phone Exeter, and Peter knew enough of police methods to guess that little time would have been wasted in coming to fetch him had they been informed he was at Okewood Hall. And why, too, had he been made to change his clothes and forced to spend the night in this poky little room at the top of the house, when the bedroom would have sufficed?

By feeling round the walls he had already discovered the small dimensions of his prison, which was devoid of all furniture and had a small window overlooking the grounds. The moon, which had served him so kindly on the previous night, was hidden behind a sullen pall of cloud stretching from horizon to horizon, and he could make out no detail. His explorations over, he had resigned himself to the discomfort of a night on the bare boards, but though he felt unutterably tired, his head was throbbing painfully and he had been unable to sleep. Once or twice it struck him that he was in for a bout of illness. He was clear-headed enough and felt quite capable of making any call on his physical resources, but his pulse was rapid. He had succeeded in opening the window before he lay down, for the atmosphere was stifling, but it was still uncomfortably hot, and he idly wondered if it was worth while asking his gaoler for a drink. He knew the man was there, because when he had forced open the window the fellow had angrily demanded to know what he was doing.

Suddenly a light flickered on the wall opposite and vanished, to be followed after an interval by the distant mutter of thunder. Presently the lightning danced

again, the ensuing growl being louder than before, and Peter roused himself. The elemental fury of a thunderstorm had always appealed to him, and since sleep seemed impossible, he got up and went to the window. Towards the horizon the sky was continuously lightening up, and it was obvious that a considerable storm was brewing.

He had been standing there for perhaps ten minutes, leaning his arms on the window-sill as he watched the quickening display, when he became aware of a light of another kind drawing near, and the headlights of a powerful car swept up to the house and stopped. Craning his neck out of the window he saw several men descend from the car, and two other figures that left the house to greet them. Faintly he could hear their conversation, and then, in a lucky moment, one of the group passed in front of the headlights, and he could have cried out with amazement, for it was none other than Horstman. He would have known that bulk and that limp anywhere. They all went into the house, the car drove away, and Peter was left to speculate as to what this visit portended.

Of course he had known that Sir Mortimer and Horstman were associated, and if he had felt any doubts as to the truth of Mr. Bridgewater's story the fact of the girl whom he had encountered in the lane having met Horstman at Okewood Hall was sufficient corroboration. But he had not expected to see Horstman again so soon. He supposed he had come by the car which had just arrived, and he found himself longing to know what was going on downstairs. Yet with a locked door and an armed man between him

and the rest of the house he might as well long for the moon. And just then the sky opened with a flood of yellow light, and he saw something that made his heart miss a beat with the sudden idea to which it gave birth.

The window at which he stood was a dormer one, and what the lightning had revealed was a similar window jutting out of the roof, about a dozen yards away. The mad notion had come into his head to try and reach it. Such a feat, even in broad daylight and performed by a man in normal health, was one not to be undertaken lightly, for a slip meant certain death: for anyone in his condition it was stark lunacy. Nevertheless, no sooner had the idea entered his head than he resolved to try it. If he failed—well, it was a quick ending; whereas if he succeeded he might have an opportunity of roaming about the house which would never occur again. The risk, he considered, was justified, and having once made his decision he resolutely shut out all thoughts of failure—a psychological trick which had more than once served him in good stead in the past.

As soon as the next flash came he marked the edge of the rain-spouting, and then, climbing through the window and holding tightly to the sill, he slowly lowered his body until he was lying full length on the tiles, his feet feeling for the spouting. He could not get a satisfactory grip at first, and almost unconsciously he twisted his neck and looked down. And in that moment a blinding figure of light divided the heavens, illuminating the ground far beneath his feet as if it had been brightest day, so that he suddenly felt giddy

and was filled with terror. And while the thunder crashed and rolled, for all the world as if the sky was a huge wooden flooring upon which giants were trundling cannon-balls, he lay on the steep roof with his eyes shut, his whole body trembling beyond his control, while the thought of that awful drop gripped him like a nightmare.

How long he remained in that position he never knew, but gradually the giddiness passed and confidence came back, bringing with it a new determination to carry out the feat he had set himself. It was a bad moment when he let go his hold on the window sill, for although he knew the spouting in such houses was usually reliable, he could not be certain that it had not rotted in places. With the utmost caution, leaning all the weight he could on the roof, he slowy worked his way along. And presently, breathing a little prayer of thankfulness that his nerve had held, he found himself with his hands on the sill of the further window. It was shut, but this was a small matter, and pulling down his sleeve so as to cover his hand, he smashed the window, taking the opportunity to do it during a particularly loud clap of thunder lest the noise of breaking glass should reach the ears of his gaoler. There was no difficulty in opening the casement once he had raised the catch, and he pulled himself over the sill just as a hissing noise announced the approach of the rain.

The room in which he found himself was as bare as the one he had left, and he prayed the door was not locked on the outside. Investigation revealed the pleasing fact that the key was inside, and he lingered

a few moments to collect himself, waiting for the next rumble of thunder ere opening the door. No sooner had it boomed out than he turned the handle and cautiously peeped through.

A dozen yards away sat his gaoler with his back turned, a candle on a small table beside him, by the light of which he seemed to be trying to read a book. Peter lost no time. As before, he waited only for the friendly thunder; then with half a dozen rapid strides he reached the man and caught him by the throat. He was in no mood for dalliance. The man struggled fiercely, but he had little chance in Peter's powerful grip; moreover, his revolver was on the table by the candle. In less than a minute he was lying motionless on the floor and Peter was unlocking the door of his old prison, wondering what he should do to prevent the man raising an alarm if he regained consciousness. He decided that it would be sufficient to lock him in; if he chose to escape the same way he had gone—well, he was welcome to it. Dragging the man inside, he locked the door, and after examining the revolver, which was loaded in all six chambers, he appropriated the matches and blew out the candle. Then he stole along the passage to the head of the stairs and stood listening.

All was still, and he descended to the next landing. He was in his stockinged feet and made no sound. He could see that the light was switched on in the hall below, and treading at the extreme end of each stair he went cautiously down, and then stopped near the bottom as the sound of voices reached him from one of the downstairs rooms. Holding the revolver ready for instant use, he crept from the shelter of the stairs

into the hall. No one was there. A grandfather clock ticked sedately against one wall, pointing to twenty minutes to one. There was no other sound except the drone of conversation from the one room. Going to the door he laid his head against it, but it was substantially built of oak and he could not distinguish the words.

Now that he had reached this stage, however, he was determined to overhear what was going on, and he made a rapid examination of the front door. At any time a servant might appear, and it was imperative that he should make no noise. Luckily the bolts, which were shot, slipped back noiselessly, and he found himself outside in the now torrential rain, which drenched him to the skin as he slipped round to the front of the house. There was no mistaking the room, for it was the only one lit up. He knew there was a risk in appearing against the lighted window, but this chance had to be taken; and to his joy the window was open a couple of inches at the bottom. With a fast-beating heart he crouched down on to the flower-bed and listened. A voice was speaking, a cold professorial voice with a very distinct enunciation, so that he could hear every word clearly above the fierce hiss of the rain.

(iii)

"I do—I make the statement with the utmost confidence," the voice was saying. "It would, in my opinion, revolutionize the whole theory of radiation."

With the tip of his finger Peter carefully parted the curtains so that he could see part of the room.

Facing him, smoking a cigarette in a long amber

holder, sat an ascetic-looking man with white hair and singularly pale eyes, and although Peter had never seen him before he set him down at once as Sir Mortimer Drude. Opposite a small table on which drinks were laid out sat two other men smoking cigars, one a little fat man with a swarthy skin and spectacles, the other lean and bearded, looking rather like a fierce and hungry goat. And with his back to the window was yet another, in whom Peter had no difficulty in recognizing the gross and bulky Horstman.

"A bold claim, Sir Mortimer," the little fat man replied with the slightest foreign accent. "And you are prepared to prove it?"

The scientist nodded his head gravely. "To-night if necessary," he said.

"High time, too," growled the man who looked like a fierce goat.

"I may as well admit that it was not my original intention to do anything of the sort," Sir Mortimer confessed after a pause. "My work is not yet entirely complete, and it is manifestly impossible for me to give you the results of it piecemeal. Circumstances, however, have conspired to-night to offer me exceptional opportunities for a certain little experiment which I have for some time been contemplating, and I feel sure my apparatus is sufficiently far advanced to enable me to conduct this experiment with enough success to convince you of its extraordinary efficiency. It will of course be only on a small scale, but it should suffice."

"One hopes so," murmered the little man, placidly contemplating the end of his cigarette.

"First of all, however, I will endeavour to give you some idea of how far my discoveries have progressed," went on the scientist. "If you will give me your attention for ten minutes I will tell you the gist of my discoveries up to the present."

Outside in the soaking rain the watcher thrilled with excitement. This was the work of fate and nothing else.

"For many years," the scientist began, "I have been attracted, like many of my professional brethern, by the possibility of interplanetary communication. As you know, there was, some twenty years ago, considerable excitement in the world because it was claimed that certain signals had been received from Mars. Lowell, if you remember, had already asserted that there was sufficient evidence to prove the existence of human activity on the planet, though his theory was not generally credited; and when it was reported that definite signals had been seen, the hypothesis received new life, various ways being suggested as to how we should reply. The one obvious difficulty in the way was, of course, the lack of a common basis of language. Even if we succeeded in transmitting signals which were actually received, they would be useless without a suitable interplanetary vocabulary.

"Different means of overcoming this difficulty were suggested. A French astronomer was in favour of constructing gigantic figures on the sand of the Sahara desert, illustrating simple mathematical truths. Another astronomer recommended signalling mathematical truths by means of reflecting the sun in a huge mirror."

"Mathematical truths—how do you mean?" growled the man like a goat.

"I mean this. Suppose I were to signal one flash and then two and then four, it follows that if I get eight in reply there is clear evidence of the existence of a functioning intelligence. The process may be elaborated in a way which it is hardly necessary for me to go into now, but you may rest assured that such a method is entirely feasible. It was suggested also that signals should be sent by the creation of a gigantic artificial star by electricity, directed by parabolic mirrors which it was thought would give light equivalent to a star of the eighth magnitude. This was, of course, before wireless transmission had attained to anything like its present stage of development, and nothing was attempted, for the simple reason that few influential people could be persuaded that signals had really been received. With the arrival of the means of sending powerful waves through the ether the problem became simplified, and a definite method was devised by which messages could actually be sent out so that they could be read by a sufficiently intelligent being.

"With that method I am not going to weary you, since it would take some time to explain and would necessitate the use of a diagram. Suffice it to say that the bare outline of it is this. The transmitter sends out, we will say, ten short signals, then one long one, and then ten more short, after which he pauses. Next he sends nine short signals, one long, one short, one long again, and again nine short signals, after which he pauses once more. Two lines of dots and dashes

have now been transmitted. An intelligent being, receiving them on another planet, might at first put them in one long row. On the other hand he might not; it is just possible that he might place the second row directly underneath the first, in which case he would have the top angle of the letter 'A' composed of dashes, in the centre of the two rows of dots. You follow me?"

"Admirably," said the little fat man. "Pray proceed."

"A third row would be made up of eight dots, one dash, and so on, until after twenty rows were complete the recipient, supposing him to be taking the signals down, would have the complete letter 'A' composed of dashes in the midst of an oblong of dots. The transmitter would then send, in his last line, the morse for 'A'. Once the whole alphabet was complete it would not be difficult to begin to send, in the same way rough outlines of familiar objects, such as the figure of a man, with their names underneath in morse."

"A somewhat long process?" observed the little man.

"An exceedingly long and laborious process," Sir Mortimer agreed. "I am only relating it to you to convince you that it is possible to establish communication. The signals which I was fortunate enough to trap were nothing like so complicated and much more easily read. I completed my instrument in 1922, just a year after it was reported that Marconi had received some mysterious signals on a long and continuous wavelength, thought to have emanated at the time from Mars."

"These signals of yours—were they from Mars?" the little man asked.

"They emanate from an intelligence functioning on a planet considerably further advanced along the course of evolution than our own," was the reply. "For three years now I have been tapping this immense supply of knowledge which has been trickling through the ether—such a stream of knowledge and power as staggers the intellect, and makes our present-day research seem like the gropings of a child in the dark beside it."

Sir Mortimer paused, his pale eyes fixed on vacancy. The lean bearded man broke the silence.

"That's all very well, my friend," he said. "We don't doubt your theories; what we want is proof that they can be applied for practical purposes. Those rays you've just been telling us about—theoretically they may do what you claim for them, but what we want is a practical demonstration of their power."

"You shall have it," rejoined the scientist calmly. "You shall have it to-night."

For the first time since Peter had been at the window Horstman spoke.

"Tell 'em about the young cub we've got upstairs," he suggested.

Sir Mortimer struck a match before replying.

"It so happens, gentlemen, that a young man who chose to try and interfere with our plans—I will not trouble you with the details—has fallen into my hands by a rather remarkable chain of circumstances. The point I want you to note is that not a soul except ourselves knows of his whereabouts. My niece, indeed,

knew he was here in the first instance, but as she is of a peculiarly sensitive disposition it was necessary to adopt a simple ruse in order to convince her that he had left the house. What, in your opinion, should I do with him?"

"How much does he know?" demanded the lean man.

"Sufficient to make this country a difficult one for us to live in if he were free," Sir Mortimer answered.

The little fat man sighed placidly. "My friend, my motto in life is: 'If there is only one wise course to take—take it.' Did not your Byron say 'Whom the gods love die young'? I would make no mistake about the popularity in Heaven of that young man!"

"Precisely my own opinion," the scientist replied. "There is, however, an alternative."

"Yes?" The little man looked at him inquiringly through his spectacles.

"Go on," urged his companion impatiently, for Sir Mortimer had paused and was smiling again—like some horrible evil satyr, Peter thought, as he watched him.

"How if I used him for—a little demonstration?" he said quietly.

There was a profound silence, to be broken by the soft chuckling of the little fat man as the other's meaning dawned on him.

"Excellent, my friend, excellent," he murmured. "The human guinea-peeg! The sufferer in the noble cause of science! And it will be—what you say?—killing two birds with one stone! Oh, a lovely scheme, my friend—very clever!"

Suddenly there came an interruption. The door burst open and the man who had taken away Peter's clothes, the ex-pugilist, dashed into the room, his coarse face flushed with excitement.

"He's got away—Sefton's knocked out! he gasped.

"God in heaven, what do you mean?" cried Sir Mortimer, rising from his seat. "Get a grip of yourself, Copping—what's happened?—Quick!"

"Sefton—I went up to relieve him . . . but he'd gone," the bruiser gulped. "So I burst in the door . . . and found him . . . Sefton . . . lyin' unconscious!"

Sir Mortimer's eyes seemed to be shining like stars in his livid countenance. Horstman and the man who looked like a fierce goat had sprung from their chairs; only the little fat man seemed unperturbed, as he blandly helped himself to a cigarette from the box on the table.

Whereupon our Mr. Brown, much as he would have liked to stay to watch developments, decided that it was high time to be gone.

## CHAPTER V

### ONE EVENTFUL NIGHT

(1)

THE rain had ceased some little time ago, and the air had that refreshing coolness that often follows a thunderstorm, as Peter sped away down the drive, hurried on by a very real dread of what would happen to him if he again fell into the hands of Sir Mortimer

Drude. Sheer luck had enabled him to overhear something of the plans which that enterprising gentleman held regarding his immediate future, and he prayed luck would stand by him until he had succeeded in putting himself beyond the possibility of recapture.

How this was to be accomplished he had no idea, since he was in entire ignorance of the locality in which Okewood Hall was situated; the only thing he could do was to push on, trusting to the dark and the fact that it would take Sir Mortimer some little time to organize a search-party. For he had no doubt that every conceivable effort would be made to retake him. Altogether apart from the unpleasing use to which Sir Mortimer proposed to put his body, his escape meant ruin to the occupants of Okewood Hall. It would take them perhaps ten minutes, he thought, to learn that he had actually left the building; and then . . . Peter felt the comforting weight of the revolver in his pocket and made a grim resolution that if matters came to a head there would be at least one way of preventing a distinguished but insane physicist from allowing an important discovery to fall into the hands of unscrupulous adventurers.

There was sufficient light to enable him to see the drive stretching away in front of him for a considerable distance, and it occurred to him that there might be a lodge at the other end with telephonic communication to the Hall. It was obvious that he stood a greater chance of escaping if he left the comparative openness of the drive and struck across country until he reached some road, and he accordingly climbed a railing and made his way across a meadow towards what looked

like the edge of a wood. The ground was difficult going, for it was pitted with rabbit-holes, and he took a header more than once. It was after the last of these tumbles that the powerful headlights of a car appeared in the direction of the Hall, and swept at terrific speed down the drive he had just left. Almost immediately afterwards another car came into sight round the Hall and sped along a course at right-angles to the first—evidently along another drive. Peter watched it with a kind of dull despair creeping into his heart. The cordon was already being set.

And then suddenly an idea entered his head—an idea that on the face of it was hopelessly insane, yet which, as he considered it, presented extraordinary possibilities. He wondered why he had not thought of it before. If the hunters had already made a thorough search of the Hall and decided that he had tried to escape—the most natural conclusion they could come to—the one place where they would be unlikely to look a second time was the Hall. And in the Hall was doubtless a telephone from which, with a little more of that luck which had served him so well that night, he might possibly seize the chance to inform someone of his whereabouts. More, he might even find his way into that mysterious laboratory whence all the trouble had originated. One or two members of the strange gang of which Sir Mortimer's household seemed to consist might be left on guard, but the majority were far more probably taking part in the hunt in the grounds. At any rate the chance seemed one well worth taking, and once he had put through a connection on the 'phone, even if he ultimately fell into

their hands again, his safety would be to a certain extent ensured. It was hardly likely that Sir Mortimer would run the risk of killing him, if he would have to face a possible visit from the police in the morning demanding an explanation of the whereabouts of the notorious Mr. Brown who had so mysteriously rung them up in the small hours from Okewood Hall.

Without any hesitation Peter doubled back on his tracks, and once more approached the Hall. Every room on the ground boor was now brilliantly illuminated, but he could see no one about. The front door stood open, and he approached it cautiously and looked through, only to draw back his head immediately as he espied a man standing by a table in the middle of the hall—a little man whose face was turned half away from the door, and who held a revolver by his side. It is half the battle to be able to recognize at a glance the temperament of your opponent, and Peter decided that here was a man who could be intimidated.

Levelling his revolver he said in a low distinct voice:

"Both hands up!"

And Peter knew he had judged aright. Up went the man's hands with every appearance of fear, and the blood drained from his face.

"Put the pistol on the table," said Peter. The man obeyed. "Any movement and it will be your last," added Peter grimly. "Whereabouts is the telephone?"

The man told him.

"Very well. Go and ring up the exchange. I shall stand by you while you do it."

"There won't be no one th-there," stammered the badly scared man, staring in a fascinated manner at the revolver which was pointing so steadily at his head. Under his breath Peter cursed himself for a fool. Obviously the officials at country exchanges occasionally required sleep the same as other people, only he had overlooked the trivial fact.

"Where are all the others?" he demanded quickly.

"Outside," quavered the man.

"How many?"

"About—about a dozen, sir."

"And are you alone here?"

"Yes."

Peter considered him. The man was obviously a weakling, frightened out of his life, and Peter made up his mind that he was telling the truth.

"I'm going to give you the chance of saving your miserable life, but if you don't tell me what I want to know I'll shoot you," he said peremptorily. "Understand that, you little worm?"

"Yes," said the man, cringing. Peter hated this bullying business, but he saw no alternative. The shortest way would have been to hit him over the head, but he was a creature of such poor spirit that Peter had not the heart to do it.

"First of all, then—the name of that fat little man with spectacles who was with Sir Mortimer a minute ago?"

"Mr. Pagleiro."

"And the other one—the thin one?"

"Mr. Kreller."

"Good. Now take me to Sir Mortimer's laboratory. If there's a key, get it."

But at this the fellow drew back, and his face took on an even whiter shade.

"I daren't, sir, really—no one's allowed to go there at all, and if the guv'nor knew as I'd told you——"

"My little friend," said Peter quietly, "the search party will be back in a few minutes, and as sure as there's a God above they'll find a corpse in this hall if you don't do as I tell you."

The man moistened his ashen lips.

"Very good, sir," he said despairingly. "But if the guv'nor was to know——"

"Please to remember that for the moment *I'm* your governor, and you'll obey me. Quick now!"

With many a bodeful glance over his shoulder the man led the way down a passage to a green baize door, Peter following with the firm intention of shooting him down if he made any attempt to escape. Beyond the green door was a further covered-in passage with another door at the far end, and here Peter's guide stopped.

"This is the laboratory, sir," he said.

It was locked, as Peter had expected, and though he put his shoulder to it, it refused to budge.

"Stand clear," ordered Peter, and taking aim from a short distance, fired one of his pistols at the lock. The din in that confined space was alarming, the smoke almost choking, but he emptied all the chambers of the revolver before he was satisfied; and a few moments later the splintered door yawned behind him.

"Matches," he said to his companion, and when the

man had struck one, only too eager now to ingratiate himself, Peter switched on the electric light.

He had been in a well-equipped laboratory before, but never in such a one as this. Of the uses to which half the instruments were put he had no conception, but there was no time for indulging idle curiosity, and after a quick look round he approached a large cupboard, something about the size of a bathing van, which he noticed with satisfaction was fastened with a Yale lock. This was evidently the cupboard of which Bridgewater had spoken, and without any hesitation he fired the other revolver at the lock.

"For God's sake, sir," cried his companion in what seemed like genuine alarm. "Sir Mortimer'll kill you if he finds this out."

Peter did not answer, for he had opened the cupboard doors and was examining the extraordinary instrument revealed. From the innumerable valves and dials and switches his guess that this was the super wireless set of which he was in search was confirmed, and he immediately proceeded to wrench open the huge panel, which swung out sideways on hinges. Inside was the most bewildering array of delicate mechanism he had ever seen—obviously the result of months of labour. It seemed sacrilege to destroy work of such ingenuity, but he did not hesitate. Since he seemed bound eventually to be caught, as well be killed for a pound as a penny, he reflected, and at any rate he would die with the satisfaction of knowing he had temporarily spoilt his enemies' game. Had not Sir Mortimer said that his work was not yet complete? Well, he might not be able to prevent its ultimate

completion, but at least he could defer the date by a few months—months which would enable Dick Cartwright and his friends to get busy. So with the butt of his revolver he deliberately set himself to put the mechanism beyond possibility of repair, until nothing remained but a mass of twisted rods and coils and broken wires.

The work of demolition complete, he was running his eye over the ruined structure in order to see if any part had been overlooked, his mind already beginning to work on the old problem of how to escape, when an exclamation from the man who had been his guide caused him to turn sharply, and he found himself looking down a revolver barrel, behind which gleamed the dark eyes of the girl of the motor-scooter.

(11)

"You—here!" she said in a low voice, as recognition sprang into her eyes. "But I—I thought . . . what are you doing?"

It was difficult to know what to say, and he did not answer. Then, as she realized what he had done, anger flamed into her face, and she took a step backwards, as if the very proximity of his presence disgusted her.

"You cur! You unspeakable cad!" she said slowly, and the contempt in her voice cut him like a lash. "To come back like a thief . . . and do this . . . after his kindness to you in hiding you from the police and setting you free . . ." She could scarcely speak for the intensity of her emotion. "Oh, haven't you got

anything to say—any explanation to offer?" she cried, with a sudden trembling of the lip.

Peter was silent. So Sir Mortimer had told her that he had set him free! Well, if she chose to believe in her uncle's integrity, it was no business of his to disillusion her. Yet as he saw how deeply wounded she was by the thought of his having betrayed her trust in him, he would have given much to have spared her this suffering.

She lowered her pistol, and for all the apparent ignominy of his position Peter nearly smiled. Though she thought him the vilest cad in creation, the very action showed that she instinctively trusted to his sense of honour not to take advantage of the circumstance for he still held his own revolver. It was one of the biggest unconscious tributes he had ever received, and he loved her for it.

"And what are you doing here, Davis?" she demanded, turning with quick suspicion to Peter's reluctant guide.

Before the man could speak Peter answered for him. "Please don't imagine he's my accomplice," he said. "He did all he could to stop me, but—I happened to be a bit quicker with my revolver, that's all."

"You needn't think you are going to get round me by pretending to be chivalrous," the girl said hotly. "Is this true, Davis?"

The man gave a malicious side-glance at Peter. Here was an unexpected chance to get some of his own back. "Yes, miss, he come up behind me when I wasn't looking. I never had no chance against him—

hurt me cruel hard he did, too. Shall I take his pistols away, miss?"

"Yes—and give them to me; I'll keep him covered while you call the others. You won't be given your liberty a second time," she added grimly.

The man having relieved Peter of his weapons and retired, the girl seated herself on a chair and rested the two revolvers on her knee.

"You can sit down yourself if you like," she said curtly.

"Thank you," said Peter, and did so. Thus they waited, while Peter marveled at the queer tricks of Providence in bringing him to this pass. He felt strangely indifferent as to his own fate. He could not, indeed, see a gleam of hope; for Sir Mortimer would undoubtedly kill him out of hand when he saw his wrecked instrument. Perhaps he would have enough humanity actually not to do it in front of his niece, for whom he evidently cherished some kind of regard —perhaps not. For her sake Peter hoped it would be the former. He knew that she had not the faintest notion of what she was condemning him to; in her eyes he was simply a common crook badly wanted by the police, who had not only lied to her about the crime of which he was thought to be the author, but had also outrageously abused her sympathy and help. Of Sir Mortimer's real intention she obviously had little idea; nor did he propose to enlighten her. Even more than the prospect of falling into Sir Mortimer's hands it hurt him to think that she should deem him so unworthy; but short of revealing her uncle's true character there was no other way. And he knew well

that if he so much as attempted to excuse himself such a course would only serve to increase her anger and contempt. If she chose to begin a conversation—well and good; so far as he was concerned silence was the better counsel.

The girl, for her part, remained on the alert, ready to jump to her feet on the instant if he showed fight. Peter could not, of course, know that behind her air of grim resolution was a great welling of pity, which she tried hard to suppress. He was a vile scoundrel, of course—she knew it and told herself she hated him for it—but he looked so tired and ill that she needed all the determination of which she was capable to keep a severe countenance. And how humbly he had taken her rough-tongueing! Watching his face furtively she thought she had never seen anyone who looked less like a criminal. She looked away, sternly reminding herself of the well-known fact that some of the most hardened villains in history have possessed the faces of angels.

A noise in the passage outside announced the return of the search-party, and she rose to her feet as Sir Mortimer rushed in, with half a dozen men at his heels.

"So you found him, Una? Where——?"

And then he stopped, as if petrified. He had caught sight of the wrecked instrument board. The next moment, with a terrible cry, he flung himself at Peter, and there was immediate uproar. Peter could have settled his assailant with one hand had he been so minded, but the presence of the girl made this impossible; so evading the scientist's frenzied rush he tried to dodge towards the door, building on the hope that

none would dare to use his firearm for fear of hitting another. Several men barred his way. One he hit in the face, knocking him over—it was the lean bearded man, Kreller—but the odds were ridiculous, and he presently found himself, bruised and bleeding, with the gigantic Horstman holding one arm and the ex-pugilist the other. And for an instant his self-control gave way.

"You damned lot of filthy cowards!" he cried. "Let me go, curse you!"

"Shall I finish him off, guv'nor?" Horstman asked in his high-pitched voice, giving Peter's arm a cruel twist.

"Stop that, I tell you!"

The voice, young and clear, quelled the uproar like a miracle, and all eyes turned on the girl as she stood, like some modern allegorical picture of vengeance, a revolver in either hand, her eyes flashing her scorn and defiance.

"Leave the room all of you—at once!" she cried, stamping her foot. "How dare you behave like this in front of me! Call yourselves men!—a dozen of you against one, and him half-dead! As for you, Mr. Horstman, I've never fired a revolver at a man yet, but if you don't leave go of his arm at once I'll shoot you where you stand!"

Whether she would have carried this threat into execution was never known, for Horstman's great face turned an unpleasant colour, and he dropped Peter's arm as if it had been red-hot. The other men seemed doubtful whether to obey her orders, but at a nod from Sir Mortimer, who had recovered his

self-possession, although he was still ghastly white, they slowly withdrew until only four were left.

"Vai-ry bravely done, Mees Drude. Permit me to congratulate you on your undoubted courage."

Peter looked round. It was the little fat man with spectacles, placid as ever.

"Thank you, but I don't think I want your congratulations, Mr. Pagleiro," said the girl unsteadily, and Peter noticed that she, too, had changed colour; and suddenly, without further warning, she fainted, and Sir Mortimer caught her as she fell.

"The very best thing that could have happened," the scientist observed with satisfaction. "I was beginning to think she would be a nuisance. Keep your eye on him, Horstman, until I return!"

When Sir Mortimer, with the assistance of the ex-bruiser, had carried the girl from the room, Kreller, the man like a fierce and hungry goat, who was attending to a bleeding nose, stood in front of the prisoner, surveying him with malevolent hatred. He carried a pistol in his left hand.

"This is the young cub, is it?" he said. "I think I have to thank you for hitting me just now—well, I hate being under any obligation, so here's the gift back again with interest," and he struck Peter heavily in the face with his clenched fist.

"I can add one to that," squeaked Horstman, following up and seizing Peter by the throat. "Push me in the river, would you, blast your bones! You'll wish your own mother had strangled you at birth before I've done with you!"

There was twice Peter's strength in those monstrous

arms, and he shook his powerless victim with no more effort than a terrier shakes a rat.

"Peace, my friends, peace," cried the little fat man. "You forget . . . the leetle demonstration . . . Sir Mortimer would not have him killed—yet."

Reluctantly Horstman released his nearly unconscious victim, whose legs promptly sank under him. There was a great fear in Peter's heart—a fear, not of death, but that, in his physical weakness, he might be tempted to plead for mercy.

As he struggled unsteadily to his feet, Sir Mortimer and the ex-prizefighter returned. The scientist's marble eyes fixed themselves on him with a look of insane satisfaction.

"At last," he said quietly. "We can now continue that little experiment I was speaking of without fear of interruption. What do you think, gentlemen?"

Kreller laughed harshly. "What's the use playing the fool—shoot him and have done with it. No one will ever find out."

"No, no, my friend." Pagleiro put up a fat protesting hand. "The leetle demonstration first. Sir Mortimer promised."

"I agree," said the scientist. "Afterwards, we will consider what to do in the matter of my apparatus—" For a moment the words seemed to choke in his throat as his eyes lit on the wreck which Peter had made of it; then he recovered himself and went on: "Horstman, I make you and Copping responsible for him until I am ready. Then, gentlemen, I will endeavour to continue that little talk which was so rudely interrupted a few minutes ago, and try to relieve that

attitude of scepticism with which I am afraid you still regard my claims."

During the next ten minutes, while Sir Mortimer busied himself about the laboratory, Peter, who was made to sit on a chair on a small platform, had leisure to think of his position. A kind of indifference had settled upon him. The very thought of escape had receded to the back of his mind. He was without hope, and that state in itself brings its own kind of peace. If only they didn't torture him he thought he could die with some decency, for after all death was a small thing, and quickly over. But torture—those "experiments", of which Sir Mortimer spoke—that was what filled his soul with dread. From experience he knew the terribly unmanning effect of torn flesh and lacerated nerves, and again he prayed that his courage would hold out till the end.

(III)

Chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle in front of the platform on which Peter sat, and on one side Sir Mortimer had placed three instruments not unlike studio cameras. The hum of a dynamo came from the far end of the laboratory. The four men seated themselves, and Sir Mortimer stood by the platform in the manner of an urbane university professor about to lecture his class on some rare and valuable specimen.

"Before we commence operations," he began, "I must say a few words relating to the source of my information. Has it ever struck you, gentlemen, how extraordinarily ignorant we are; how little we have explored

of that mysterious continent, infinite in extent, which we call knowledge? I am not referring to the knowledge of one individual man in relation to all that has so far been discovered, but to the knowledge which the world has amassed compared to all that remains to be discovered. We are, indeed, no more than children paddling on the shore of that wonderful continent. A few of us have struggled up the beach and have peered amazedly through the trees, almost overcome by the dazzling promise revealed, only to be laughed at and derided when we have rejoined our fellows and tried to tell them something of what we have seen. Such was the attitude, gentlemen, of the Roman inquisition towards Galileo. It is to-day the attitude of the world with regard to spiritualism. It is the attitude which the world would adopt towards me were I to publish the result of my researches into inter-stellar communication, and it is the attitude which you are pleased to adopt towards me to-night. You require proof—the actual proof of your own five senses—before you believe me. Well, you shall have it."

He paused, his marble-like eyes resting thoughtfully on Peter.

"Now let us suppose for a moment that a man on this world does actually succeed in getting in touch with beings on another celestial body. These beings possess intelligence, and it is reasonable to suppose that they exist in some kind of civilization. It by no means follows, however, that this civilization is akin to our own. Evolution, which is more or less at the mercy of temperature and pressure, may have progressed in an entirely different direction. Knowledge

will have been brought about in an entirely different way. The chances of their having acquired precisely the same amount of knowledge as ourselves are remote; it therefore follows that they either know more or less —probably more, since they would not otherwise have been in a position to communicate with us. The question which one naturally asks is, how much more do they know? Are they still struggling on the shores of knowledge and scientific discovery, like ourselves, or have they penetrated far inland, and learnt of things which we shall not know, in the natural course of things, for thousands of years?

"Let me put it to you in this way. It is, I suppose, obvious that in, say, a thousand years' time, man will have at his beck and call scientific powers undreamt of by the present generation. Untold sources of energy lie around us unused for the want of the knowledge of how to tap them. Suppose one man were, by a miracle, possessed of the knowledge which will be in possession of the world in a thousand years' time? Or suppose—which would not be a miracle—he obtained the knowledge from another civilization outside the world, which was a thousand years ahead of our own? As I have explained to you before, such knowledge, if he kept it to himself, would simply mean that the world would lie at his mercy, for good or evil. For sheer power Alexander and Napoleon and our modern newspaper millionaires would be babes beside him."

Pagleiro asked a question. "For how long would he be able to keep the knowledge secret?"

"Once his position was established I can see no end to it."

The little man shook his head. "That is not the lesson of history, my friend. Autocracy—dictatorship (that is the word, yes?) arouses forces which inevitably bring about——"

"You cannot draw a parallel between this and any other dictatorship," Sir Mortimer interrupted. "Because absolute omnipotence has never before lain in the hands of one man. However, you shall see for yourself. One moment."

With a tense expression the scientist raised his hand to one of the camera-like objects beside him. And at that instant every light in the laboratory went out.

There was a moment's silence, everyone being taken by surprise; then Sir Mortimer's voice rang out, shrill with anxiety.

"Hold him, Horstman!—Copping!—hold him!"

But Peter, quick to take advantage of this unlooked-for occurrence, had already slipped from his chair. Not a gleam of light was visible anywhere, but he had a clear idea of the position of the door, and he began to make his way towards it, thankful for the noise of blows and curses which had broken out, suggesting that Horstman, and Copping, the ex-bruiser, had each mistaken the other for him in the darkness, and were engaged in a praiseworthy effort to prevent each other's escape. Sir Mortimer was heard above the din shrieking for matches, but by the time someone had struck one, Peter, after once or twice cannoning with painful force into hard objects that felt like benches, had reached the door, which, to his surprise, was open. Into the impenetrable blackness of the passage he dashed, with one hand on the wall as a guide, just as a

fresh tumult breaking out in the laboratory warned him that his escape was discovered. He had no plan, save to try and find a way out of the house, and he fully realized that, unarmed as he was, his chance of attaining that desire was microscopic; nevertheless, he blundered on. It looked as if the lights all over the house had gone out, for there was still nothing but darkness ahead. And then, at the far end of the passage, he bumped into someone, and with a sudden fury sought for and gripped his opponent's throat. But the next moment he released his hold in dismay, for the neck his fingers had closed round was a woman's.

"Oh!—please!—don't," a girl's voice gasped. "Quick, there's just a chance," she went on hurriedly. "Go through the door on the right, and you'll find a car—oh, be quick."

From the other end of the passage came the sound of hurrying feet and furious voices.

"Quick," she cried in an agony of dread.

Then Peter did a thing of which he would never in his wildest dreams have deemed himself capable. He seized her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"This is the second time," he said gently. "I shall remember it always."

The next moment he was gone.

(IV)

The door which she had mentioned was wide open, and darting through, he found himself in the drive, with a car, its headlights full on and its engine running, standing not a dozen yards away. He saw it was

a make with which he was familiar, and leaping into the driving-seat he let in the clutch as a revolver cracked behind him and the windscreen shivered to atoms. A regular volley of shots followed, and he felt a violent blow on his right shoulder, but by this time he had got up considerable speed and he was soon out of pistol-shot range. Opening the throttle wide he tore down the drive, expecting every instant to see the reflection of pursuing headlights, but none came, and he wondered if the splendid girl who had so opportunely come to his aid had put the other car out of action. From what he had seen of her, he thought it a likely supposition.

Down the drive he swept with the wind cool in his face, nothing between him and freedom now but the gates at the end. There might be a lodge, but after having slipped through Sir Mortimer's fingers he could afford to laugh at the likelihood of a lodge-keeper trying to stop him. The car, however, never reached the gates, for Peter was all at once overcome by a deadly faintness. Feeling himself losing consciousness he thrust hard on clutch and brake, an action which probably saved him from complete disaster; for although the car left the drive, bumping like a live thing over some adjacent grass-land, its reduced speed stopped it from overturning. When consciousness returned he was still in the driving-seat, but he felt desperately ill. And when he tried to start the car again it refused to budge: something had gone wrong with the transmission.

He climbed out of the car and looked back in the direction of Okewood Hall. It was still plunged in

darkness, and he could hear no signs of pursuit. Remembering that the car's lights would give away his whereabouts, he hurriedly switched them off; then, hardly conscious of volition on his part, he stumbled towards the drive, along which he walked for some distance with a dazed mind. Every single part of his body clamoured for him to lie down and rest, yet difficult though it was to think consistently, he knew he must struggle on. Presently, dimly aware that to continue on the drive spelt danger, he turned aside and began to cross a stretch of turf. There was still no sound of pursuit.

Like a man in a nightmare, he staggered on until he came to an iron fence, which he managed to climb, and found himself in a field of long grass. The longing to let himself fall over and lie down—snug among the thick grass—grew on him as he stumbled across the field. Peace, at any rate, lay there—long abiding peace—and after all, what was the use of struggling? The call of exhaustion was almost overpowering, and there is no doubt that if he had once tripped he would never have risen again; yet somehow he kept his feet and came to the other side.

He found he was leaning against a gate—a wooden five-barred gate—and beyond it was a lane. He could see it plainly, and obviously he had somehow got to climb the gate and reach the lane. It took him five minutes of painful concentrated effort to get over this obstacle, and when he had accomplished it he was overtaken with horrible nausea, which made him clutch the gate like a drowning man. Following this came a weak fit of giggling that all but made him collapse

but at length he was in the lane, lurching along like some drunken tramp in the gaining dawn, moving almost mechanically. His brain, as apart from his will, had ceased to function.

And so, in due course, as the eastern sky began to be suffused with orange and yellow, he came to a cross-roads where the lane debouched upon a tar-paved highway, and here the last drop of energy oozed out of him, and he flopped on to the grass beneath a signpost.

A motor-car honked, and he looked up wearily. Sir Mortimer at last, he supposed. Well, he was past resistence—broken, down, and out. It was not Sir Mortimer, however, but two policemen in a Ford car. They peered curiously at the wild figure under the signpost, and the car stopped.

"Is it, d'ye think?" asked the one who was driving. "It's him, right enough," said the other, and got out.

Peter saw him coming, and laughed. "It's me right enough!" he croaked. "Dramatic arrest of famous international footballer in the dawn!" And he went off into a cackle of laughter that told its own tale to the two officers.

"Been in the wars a bit, haven't you?" said the one who had dismounted, in a not unkindly voice. He had been concerned in many arrests, this policeman, and was familiar with the appearance of criminals who had been forced to give themselves up through hunger and other causes after long struggles to evade the law, but he never remembered having seen one so utterly spent as this. Blood was on his face and clothes—what was left of them—and to the trained

eye of the officer, he looked not far off the point of complete collapse.

"Just a little," said Peter with his eyes closed, "just a little."

Then he opened them again, and summoning all his remaining strength, spoke in a firmer voice:

"You've got me all right, and I won't make any trouble. But before you take me along I want to make a statement—take it down if you can. There's hell brewing for the old world back yonder, and someone's got to stop it. Sir Mortimer Drude——"

"Yes?" said one of the officers eagerly, for Peter had paused, tormented by the difficulty of finding a beginning amidst the tangle of impressions which confused his mind. And at all costs his story must be coherent and continuous. He closed his eyes again hard in the endeavour to concentrate.

"Go to the Foreign Office and find someone who knows Colonel Richard Cartwright," he said, slowly. "Tell him to go to Bratislava, Czecho-Slovakia, where Colonel Cartwright is lying ill, and tell him this. Bridgewater was right in his suspicions. Sir Mortimer Drude has got into communication with another world in a higher state of civilization than our own, and has in his possession scientific secrets of enormous power which he is selling to a gang of international crooks who will probably use them for their own ends. Got that down? The transaction has not yet taken place, however, on account of the gang not being convinced of the efficacy of Sir Mortimer's discoveries. Through a motor accident I got taken into Sir Mortimer's house, where I succeeded

in putting out of action the wireless instrument by which he received the communications from the other world."

Peter paused once more and put both hands to his head. Waves of excruciating agony had begun to surge through his brain, making the effort of concentrating more difficult. The two officers waited with open notebooks.

"After I had done this I was caught," he proceeded at length, "and Sir Mortimer proposed to conduct an experiment upon me in order to convince some members of the gang who were present—Pagleiro, Kreller and Horstman—that his assertions were true. What the nature of this experiment was I don't know, for thanks to Sir Mortimer's niece I managed to escape, but I have no doubt in my own mind they intended to kill me. Sir Mortimer himself is a madman, and should be put away. The other men are scoundrels of the worst type—enemies of society—and if they once get the secret into their hands God knows where it will end. The girl—Drude's niece—is, I am convinced, innocent of the real nature of her uncle's transactions, and she undoubtedly saved my life. Tell Colonel Cartwright this—he'll know what to do. Now that Bridgewater is dead——"

"Hold on a minute," interrupted one of the officers. "You're wrong there. Bridgewater—the man you're supposed to have tried to murder—isn't dead."

"Not—dead?" said Peter slowly.

"Not a bit of it," was the cheerful reply. "Had a narrow shave, certainly, but he's a long sight off being dead. And if it's any pleasure for you to know, we know it wasn't you who tried to do him in."

"Then—" Peter's mind was spinning like a top—"there was never any need . . . I thought . . . " He broke off, and gave an odd laugh. "Lord, what a fool," he murmered.

And then happiness swirled over him like a tide. Fool he was, no doubt, but in his folly he had not been entirely unsuccessful, and Bridgewater—Bridgewater whom he had mourned as dead, and for whose death he had held himself in part responsible—was alive, and would carry on the good work he had begun. Now that the weight was lifted he realized how heavy it had been, and his heart sang with the joy of achievement. He rose unsteadily to his feet.

"I'm all right now," he said with the old cheerful ring in his voice. "Your news is wonderful, and alters things entirely."

He grinned at the two policemen; the next moment the world gave a sudden heave and he pitched forward on to the grass and lay still.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE HUT ON THE SAND DUNES

For ten long days and nights our Mr. Brown lay in an Exeter nursing-home, battling with the particular species of demon that frequent the bedsides of sick men; at the end of which time, his constitution being sound and his wound not serious, he began to mend rapidly. From the doctors and nurses and various members of the local police-force he learnt many things about which he was intensely curious; but it

was not until he had been in the house a fortnight that all doubts and anxieties as to his own position were finally cleared up.

The cause of this relief was a visit from two men. They introduced themselves as Detective-Inspector Claggs of the C.I.D. department of New Scotland Yard and Major Tremayne of the Foreign Office—the first a smart, clean-shaven man with the look of a naval-officer in mufti, the other rugged and kindly, with a broken nose and very bright-blue eyes. Both were pleasant and complimentary. They began by assuring Peter that he need anticipate no further trouble from the police, and invited him to tell his own story. When Peter had done, Major Tremayne spoke:

"You seem to have had a most providential escape, and I really don't know whether you deserve commiseration on your bad luck in getting into so many awkward situations, or congratulations on the facility with which you turn them to good account. First of all, however, you would probably like to hear about Mr. Bridgewater. He isn't out of hospital yet, but he's very much better and already itching to be out and about again. I had a chat with him a few days ago, and he tells me that on the night he was attacked the first thing he knew was the noise of someone getting through the window. He jumped up and grappled with the fellow at once, and from his own account they seem to have had a pretty hectic fight of it, several more of the blackguards joining in. As you know, he is a powerfully-built fellow, and he soon settled his first adversary—as a matter of fact he broke his neck—but what happened after that isn't so clear. He remembers

getting hold of one of your golf-clubs and laying about with it; then apparently one of the swine hit him over the head. The rest you know. Your own story corroborates the fact that Bridgewater did actually kill his antagonist, and it's quite clear that after having got the papers they left him for dead, taking their own dead pal away with them. The landlady, hearing the commotion, had come down, scared out of her life, and as soon as the attacking party had cleared off she ran for the police. Then you came back on the scene and made the same mistake as Horstman's gang—you thought Bridgewater was dead."

"Unfortunately, I did," said Peter. "Looking back at it now, my running away seems rather absurd, but given the same circumstances again I don't think I should do differently. How's the policeman I had a little difference with?"

Tremayne looked at him with an innocent expression.

"Policeman?" he said. "I don't know anything about a policeman—do you, Claggs?"

The detective grinned and shook his head.

"Of course not," said Tremayne. "Neither of us knows anything about your having a little difference with a policeman—you must be thinking about someone else."

Peter caught the merry wink trembling in one of the Major's blue eyes, and smiled his understanding.

"There was only one officer concerned," went on Tremayne with much gravity. "His name is Trethewy, and I am given to understand he—er—had the misfortune to fall and hit his head on the night in question—an accident from which he happily recovered with great rapidity. That so, Claggs?"

"As you say, sir," said Claggs solemnly.

"Constable Trethewy, therefore, fades from the picture," proceeded the Major. "The unfortunate part is that your friend Sir Mortimer and his household have elected to do the same thing."

"I heard so," said Peter. "Cleared out, I suppose?"

"Bag and baggage. We raided 'em the same day we found you. Gone! Vanished! Not a sign of anyone in the whole place. Servants and everyone. The only things left were a two-seater Climax with its back-axle broken, the remains of some kind of wireless set in the laboratory, and one of two locks that looked as if they'd been opened with a revolver."

Peter nodded thoughtfully. "I certainly made a good job of that wireless-set. No trace of them, I suppose?"

"None at all," said Tremayne. "There may be doubts about Sir Mortimer Drude's mental balance, but there's precious little doubt about his ability to disappear into thin air."

"We haven't heard word or sign of him since the day he vanished," said Claggs, "and the whole country has been on the look-out for him, I might tell you."

"What about the Isotta Fraschini?" Peter asked. "That shouldn't be an easy car to disguise."

"You wouldn't think so," said the detective. "But ten to one it's locked up in a private garage in the country. Still, we've got hopes. They can't get out of the country without leaving from a recognized port."

"Unless they fly," suggested Peter. "I seem to remember Bridgewater saying something about a

seaplane. And what about that motor-boat Horstman used?" he added.

"They might do that, of course," the detective admitted.

"The way I look at it is this," said Tremayne. "Here is this potty genius who thinks he has got into touch with some civilization on another world which has advanced in scientific knowledge much farther than our own. We have yet to receive proof that he has—it may be all bunkum. On the other hand I see no reason to deny the possibility of there being another world inhabited by intelligent beings, nor would I say it is impossible that some day communication will be established. Supposing that Sir Mortimer's assertion is true, and not the mere ebullition of a deranged mind, I take it that for some time past he has been receiving a regular flow of this super-knowledge. Now has he received enough to satisfy Messrs. Pagleiro and Co., or has your smashing of his lines of communication put a stopper on the business until he fits up another of his patent wireless-outfits? I must confess I should like to know what it was they proposed to do to you, Brown."

"Thank you," said Peter with a dry laugh. "I'm very glad I'm not in a position to be able to gratify your curiosity."

"It therefore boils down to this," continued Tremayne. "If his information isn't complete we have a respite of some months; if, however, it is complete, and is what Pagleiro and Co. want, there'll be squalls blowing up in a very short time. My own impression is that we shall hear of something any day. In the

meantime the job is to find Sir Mortimer's whereabouts."

"It rather looks like a case of 'as you were'," Peter remarked. "We're more or less in the same place we were before I started."

"My dear fellow, no, no!" objected Tremayne. "Things are very different. Before your show we were working absolutely in the dark; we knew nothing definite; if we arrested Sir Mortimer we had no case; but now the position is entirely changed. His sudden bolting is a confession of guilt in itself. He dare not show his face anywhere where he is likely to be recognized. There's only one thing I'm really afraid of."

"What's that?" Peter asked.

"Your safety," was the reply. "I'm not going to alarm you unduly, but I should suggest that you walk very warily for the next month or two—very warily indeed. It isn't absolutely necessary that you should go back to your business just yet, I suppose? I mean, you could take another holiday and get thoroughly fit again?"

Peter looked at him steadily. "Do you mean that they will attempt my life?" he asked.

"I think it highly probable," said Tremayne frankly. "Remember, you are the only witness against them. So long as you are alive they are in danger. Moreover, apart from expediency, you have spoilt their game, and I'm afraid they won't love you for it. I should suggest a crowded seaside resort, where you are not likely to be alone for long. Why not adopt a slight change of name?—it might save you a certain amount of publicity, and you can always explain

why if you happen to meet a friend. I should also recommend getting hold of one of those compressed-air revolvers. Your car, by the way, is in a garage at Okehampton."

"I'd almost forgotten all about it, to tell you the truth," Peter confessed. "Let me see, there was also the matter of a bicycle I borrowed from a parson—rather a decent chap—"

"And also, I think, the matter of a motor-scooter," put in Major Tremayne, with a roguish twinkle in his blue eyes. "What is the classical parallel, Claggs?—I forget—the bold bad baron and the tender-hearted maiden—what?"

He laughed merrily at Peter's discomfiture; then his voice grew serious again. "You'll keep a hand in the game, of course," he added.

Peter did not answer at once. It was the old story, the same question that had lain between him and Bridgewater that night at Tregenneth, with all his inclination tugging the one way, bidding him clear out of the business while there was yet time. But he knew in his heart he could never take such a course now—the issues had been made too plain. Not even the thought that the bringing to book of Sir Mortimer must inevitably cause pain and disgrace to fall upon the girl who had saved his life could alter the pointing of the finger of duty. But he felt no elation at the prospect of carrying on the struggle. There was not even the spur of hatred, for Peter was a man incapable of bearing a grudge. It was the tragic necessity of the thing, the realization that so long as the brilliant but warped brain of Sir Mortimer was at the use of the

unscrupulous adventurers under whose influence he had fallen there would be untold misery in store for the world, that made any other way impossible. All of which Major Tremayne doubtless knew; indeed, his last sentence was less of a question than a statement.

## (II)

Three weeks later found Peter staying alone at the Royal Hotel Seabridge, under the name of Bryan. The choice of Seabridge was not his own. Shortly after the visit of Major Tremayne and Claggs he had received a telegram from Bridgewater which ran as follows:

> Congratulations suggest another holiday recommend Seabridge golf watch military men's game take care yourself.

and he had interpreted it as a command.

Seabridge, however, famed for its breezes and notorious for its mud, did not seem to offer much promise of excitement. The population—or at any rate that part which appeared on the front—consisted of bronzed young men in flannels and blazers, and their healthy-looking, free-striding flapper companions; prosaic and perspiring fathers and mothers with brown-limbed children; fierce-looking elderly gentlemen with parchment faces and ramrod backs (ex-governors of a million souls somewhere out East as like as not); mahogany-faced boat-touts ("Trip round the bay, zur"); bathers, balloon-men, bath-chairs and bandsmen, and all the decent accompaniments that go to

make up the English seaside resort—accompaniments which Peter absorbed and delighted in for three days, while awaiting the arrival of his golf-clubs from Tregenneth—but which were poles apart from the sinister business which was always in his mind.

During this time he kept mostly to himself; nor did he meet anyone he knew, a relief for which he was grateful; for during the few days he had spent at home he had done nothing but acknowledge the greetings of friends—in the post as well as the street—anxious to commiserate with him on his recent escapade. These friends of course knew nothing of his adventure at Okewood Hall, all reference to Sir Mortimer Drude having been kept out of the papers. All they knew was that Peter had been wrongly suspected of having attempted to murder a man in Cornwall, and had been chased over two counties by the police in consequence. The month he had spent in hospital, it had been given out, was due to a motor accident and exposure.

On the fourth day of his visit his golf-bag arrived, and he made his way to the local golf-club, where, seeking out the secretary, he inquired if there was any chance of a game.

"What's your handicap?" demanded the secretary, an energetic little man with a chubby red face and spectacles. Peter told him—six.

"Six," repeated the secretary. "I've got the very man for you. Colonel Venning—he's a visitor—been kicking his heels for over a week without anyone to play with. Indian army man—you'll like him immensely."

There was no mistaking either Colonel Venning's profession or the clime in which he had lived. India was written in every line of his tall upright figure, in the deep furrows that ran down cheeks like brown paper, the close-cropped grey moustache and heavily-lidded eyes. He had a quiet manner and his conversation was at all times reserved; the impression altogether being of power and decision. His golf, without being brilliant, was steady, and Peter, who was out of form, lost the match that day.

Thus began a very pleasant time. The weather kept fine, and Peter rapidly got into good training. Colonel Venning proved an agreeable companion. After a few rounds Peter found his game, beating his opponent every day, but the Colonel always took his defeat with such excellent grace and good temper that Peter wished the position of affairs could be reversed. He would not, however, allow Peter to give him any strokes beyond those allowed by his handicap, which was nine.

"An excellent game—many thanks," the Colonel would observe as they strolled together to the club-house. "I must really have a few lessons from the pro."

But he never did, so far as Peter could observe.

That he was keen on improving his game, however, seemed evident by a discovery which Peter made by accident. They played only in the mornings, the Colonel never putting in an appearance after lunch, Peter generally spending the afternoon with a book on the sands, or if it were wet, making up a four at bridge in the club-house. One day, Peter and a member were talking together, and the member happened to ask him if he had ever visited the sands beyond Whale

Head, the huge headland, almost an island, that jutted out into the sea for a couple of miles, and made one horn of the wide bay. Peter replied that he had not.

"You should make the trip," said the member. "It's one of the longest stretches of sand I know in England. Nearly as long as Pendine, I should say. One of the loneliest and most desolate places in these parts, too, I should imagine. There's a muddy river to cross before you get there, and that keeps the folks away. I saw your friend there yesterday practising golf-shots."

"Colonel Venning?"

"Yes—he seems rather fond of the place; it's the second time I've seen him there. I go there to try out my racing bus—care to come along one day?"

Peter said he should be delighted, and the member, whose name was Atkinson, fixed on the following Tuesday afternoon. The sands, though only about five miles distant from Seabridge as the crow flies, were fully a dozen by road, on account of the detour it was necessary to make to avoid the river, but Atkinson, in his racing Sunbeam, made short work of the distance. The tide was far out when they arrived, and Peter thought he had seldom seen a more desolate place. For miles the firm sand stretched, a couple of hundred yards wide, straight as a Roman road, flanked on the one side by a waste of mud similar to that at Seabridge, and on the other by cheerless-looking sand-dunes.

"Wonder if the Colonel is here to-day?" Atkinson shouted, as the the car roared over the bare sand.

He had barely spoken when in the distance ahead a tiny black figure emerged from the dunes on to the

sand. So fast were they travelling that they were level with him almost at once, and sure enough it was Colonel Venning, club in hand. Peter waved to him as they sped past, but he did not appear to observe them, for there was no response. In all the boundless expanse he was the only living thing in sight. Peter thought it was a queer taste to come twelve miles—the Colonel had a small two-seater—to practice shots in that vast solitude.

He was thoughtful on the journey home, and paid little attention to the long diatribes which his companion launched on the subject of his car. Mr. Bridgewater's wire was back in his mind, and he was wondering how much the writer meant by his reference to "military men". From his short acquaintance with Bridgewater he judged him to be one of those men who never do anything without good reason; on the other hand, if he intended the telegram to be regarded as conveying a definite message, why had he not been more explicit?

On the following day, when he and Venning had their usual match, Peter said nothing about having seen him on the sands, deeming it politic for the first reference to come from the other. The Colonel, however, made no mention of it, and Peter concluded that he had not been recognized. The soldier was in an unusually companionable mood that morning, and Peter told himself that he was a fool to suppose for an instant that he was other than what he appeared to be—a typical example of the best type of Indian army officer. He determined to dismiss the absurd suspicion from his mind. If Venning chose to spend

every hour of the day practising golf-shots on the sands it was no business of his. Yet if words had any meaning he had been plainly told to keep his eye on some retired soldier who was in the "game." And the "game" in such a connection could only mean one thing.

The upshot was that next day, after lunch, he hired a bicycle, and with a dozen old golf-balls in his pocket and his bag slung over his back, he pedalled over the same road as he had taken in Atkinson's car.

The sands, when he reached them, were deserted as before. It was truly a scene of loneliness. From a couple of miles away over the mud-flats came the murmur of the sea; except for this, and the occasional croak of a passing gull, the silence was profound. It seemed impossible to believe there was a busy seaside resort less than half a dozen miles away.

Laying down his machine, Peter climbed to the top of a nearby sand-dune. Behind him the land stretched for miles as flat as the sea, a dreary waste, intersected by small dykes, and dotted here and there with farmhouses. Far on the one hand he could see the blue haze over Seabridge, and in the same direction, but nearer, the masts and rigging of a small collier marked the whereabouts of the muddy River Yatt. As he contemplated this melancholy picture his eye was caught by an erection of some sort on the dunes half a mile away —a kind of small bungalow—which was evidently invisible from the shore, for he had not seen it on his previous visit. He wondered if it was inhabited—it was an excellent place for anyone wishing to meditate in solitude, he reflected, though hardly the sort of summer abode he would choose himself.

There was no sign of Colonel Venning, and descending to the sands Peter proceeded to indulge in driving practice. Some little time later, happening to slice a ball on to the dunes, he was searching for it when he realized he was near the bungalow he had seen in the distance, and prompted by no other feeling than idle curiosity as to who could build in such an out-of-the-way place he went nearer to it. He perceived that it was really a large wooden hut, without chimney or—on his side at any rate—window. The purpose for which it was constructed he could not fathom, until the faint remains of painted lettering on the wall told him it had been used for supplying teas for holiday-makers, and had probably been closed down for lack of support. As he gazed at it, wondering what manner of person could be so foolishly optimistic as to put up a tea-shanty in such a place, the door opened and Colonel Venning came out.

A quick frown clouded the Colonel's brow as he recognized who it was, but although it was gone in an instant Peter had not failed to notice it.

"Afternoon, Colonel," he said cheerfully. "I didn't know you lived out here. I was just looking at your little summer-house."

"Why, Bryan, what brings you so far away from Seabridge?" Venning rejoined with a pleasant smile, closing the door behind him. "I thought you spent every afternoon among the poets."

"Thought I'd give 'em a rest for a change and try and correct that pull I've developed with my brassie," Peter said easily. "The course is so dashed crowded these days there's no chance of practice without making

yourself an infernal nuisance to everybody. Jolly good sands these—Atkinson was telling me about them yesterday."

"Atkinson?—That's the fellow with the racing-car. He's about the only soul who ever comes this way, bar a few trippers. You must come up and have some tea with me now you're here, Bryan—I live in a farm-house about half a mile away."

The invitation seemed so spontaneous and was made in such a friendly fashion that, in spite of the recollection of the angry frown with which the Colonel had first greeted him, Peter's vague suspicions began to disappear. What more natural than that a man living near such a stretch of sand should practise golf on it every afternoon? And why should he not use an old tea-hut as a golf-house if he so desired? Probably he only kept his clubs there. Peter felt he ought to beg the man's pardon for ever having harboured such distrustful thoughts of him.

"I shall be delighted. I didn't know you lived in these parts till yesterday—" he began—and just then a bell trilled inside the hut.

This time there was no doubt whatever about the Colonel's vexation.

"How tiresome," he exclaimed. "Excuse me a moment."

He unlocked the door, and disappeared inside, the door swinging to after him.

Peter turned away conscious of a certain feeling of excitement. Were his misgivings going to be justified after all? A telephone in a shore-hut!—and a telephone with an underground cable at that!—for there

was no overhead wire—the circumstance was, to say the least of it, unusual.

"I'm afraid we shall have to postpone our tea-party," said the Colonel, when he had once more locked up the hut and rejoined Peter. "I've got a private wire between here and the farm-house, and a rather important business message has just come through. How did you get here—ferry?"

"Biked," said Peter.

"Right—you don't want a lift then. I shall see you to-morrow morning at ten as usual. Going to put in a bit more brassie-practice?"

As he said this his deep-set eyes looked so searchingly into his companion's that Peter had the unpleasant feeling that his thoughts were being read. Lightheartedly enough he announced his intention of staying there for another hour or so, but there was little of light-heartedness in the mood in which the Colonel's departure left him.

He was both perturbed and puzzled over what he had seen. Was Venning really other than he professed to be, or was he, Peter, degenerating into a meddlesome busybody with a propensity for imagining suspicious circumstances where none existed? This was the immediate problem before him, and lighting a pipe he sat down on top of one of the dunes near the hut, in the hope that steady reflection would reveal some aspect of the case which he had hitherto overlooked.

About half an hour had passed in this way without having brought any illumination, when a droning in the sky made him look up, and he saw an aeroplane

flying at a considerable height. Taking off his spectacles he shaded his eyes and followed its progress. It was a seaplane, and apparently moving in his direction.

Suddenly the engines were switched off and it commenced to glide down towards the shore. What was the notion, Peter wondered?—there was no water nearer than the sea, two miles away. Down the machine swept until Peter could hear the wind whistling in the wires; then, when it was a couple of hundred feet above the level of the mud, the engines started with a rising roar, the 'plane swooped round in a graceful curve and proceeded to thunder along the edge of the sands, keeping just sufficiently clear for safety. The whole length of the sands was traversed in this manner until it was but a speck in the distance; then it turned and commenced to fly back again, still keeping over the sands, but much nearer to the dunes. Peter saw it would pass almost over his head.

With a roar that seemed to fill all heaven the seaplane flew by, not a hundred feet from the place where Peter sat, and as it passed he had a clear view of pilot and passenger, who were looking in his direction. And to his unutterable amazement he recognized the passenger. It was Sir Mortimer Drude.

(iii)

Peter sat very still, his heart beating with uncomfortable rapidity, while the seaplane continued its course over the sands towards Whale Head. Were they looking for him? The thought made a cold perspiration break out down his spine. For if they

were, and had come to try and kill him, he stood about as much chance of escaping alive as a beetle of crossing the Brighton Road on a Sunday. There was not an atom of cover anywhere to be seen; save for a few sparse tufts of grass growing here and there the sand-dunes were as bare as bunkers. If they were armed with rifles it was simply a case of potting him at their leisure. Yet had Sir Mortimer recognized him? He had no means of telling, but even if he had, there was nothing to be done—except perhaps dodge behind the hut, and that was a game which could not last for ever.

The aeroplane was once more turning, and Peter had to fight hard to resist the desire to run for the momentary shelter of the hut as the machine again began its journey down the length of the sands. But he had sense to realize that in the event of Sir Mortimer having failed to recognize him, a sudden rush for shelter would only serve to draw their attention. He dug his nails into the palms of his hands with the effort to keep motionless as the 'plane for the second time zoomed overhead, but the occupants made no sign of recognition. And then, in a happy moment for Peter, it began to ascend and circle towards the mud-flats, until in a moment, still rising, it was making for the open sea. Peter took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. He realized that his hands were trembling.

What was the meaning of this mysterious survey from the skies? Had Sir Mortimer been searching for him or not?—and if not, what in the name of common-sense did he mean by flying along the sands in that amazing fashion? And where in all this did Colonel Venning come in?

These were questions Peter tried to answer in vain as he cycled thoughtfully back to Seabridge. On the outskirts of the town he perceived Colonel Venning coming towards him in his two-seater. He was driving at a much faster rate than was usual with him, and he did not see Peter; and as they passed, Peter noticed a new expression on his face. If a formidable frown and a mouth set like iron were any indication, Colonel Venning was in a stormy temper.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE THREE RAYS

### (1)

PETER went at once to the post-office, where he sent off a couple of telegrams—quite ordinary telegrams they would have appeared to a casual reader, though perhaps a trifle on the lengthy side. Their statements that the writer had seen Leonard in Seabridge, accompanied by his little son Percy, together with an intimation that unfortunately the writer had had no opportunity of making himself known, afforded Peter considerable amusement: he felt he was playing the part of the secret agent of fiction to the life. When he got back to the hotel he confirmed the telegrams by letter.

At dinner that evening he found he had a table-companion—a tall young clergyman with glasses and a long neck, and an unmistakable appearance of belonging to nonconformity. With his eye for irrelevant

detail Peter watched with surreptitious amazement the exceptionally large Adam's-apple which the clergyman possessed, wholly fascinated by the undulations it caused in his lean throat whenever he swallowed. He occupied himself in the intervals between eating by solving a cross-word puzzle, and presently he leaned courteously across the table.

"Pardon me," he said in a pleasant voice. "Could you give me a synonym for trifling? Seven letters—the first 't' and ending in 'l'?"

"Trivial," said Peter promptly.

"Dear me—how very stupid of me! Trivial, of course," said the clergyman, thoughtfully popping a piece of dry bread into his mouth as he filled the letters in. "No doubt, sir, you will think I am engaged in a very trivial occupation, but I work under such high pressure as a rule that I am compelled to relax my mind whenever I can, and I find the solving of cross-word puzzles an agreeable and instructive way of doing so. Er—no wine, thank you, waiter. A little plain water, if you please. Are you making a long stay here, sir?"

With his mind full of his recent discovery Peter was inclined to be suspicious of anyone making any attempt to enter into conversation with him, but this young dissenting clergyman, with his be-spectacled eyes and his rather pompous but quite agreeable manner, was so obviously harmless that Peter was soon listening sympathetically to the trials and difficulties of a minister whose work lay among the working-class population of Birmingham. So interested, indeed, did he become, that the clergyman, waxing enthusiastic,

took from his pocket the projected plans of a mission it was proposed to erect in a particularly rough neighbourhood, and insisted on Peter examining them. It was refreshing to see such keenness in so young a man; it was refreshing to see the enthusiasm with which he leant across the narrow table the better to point out the details of the projected mission-house, absent-mindedly fingering Peter's half-empty bottle of Bass with his free hand as he did so. But it was something more than refreshing to see him, in the midst of an eloquent dissertation on the urgent necessity of maintaining some form of religious instruction among the children of the poor, drop a small pellet into the open neck of the beer-bottle with a movement so subtle that it was only by a miracle Peter chanced to observe it.

"And it is only by methods such as these—by counteracting the deadly poison-gas of materialism that is advancing over the life of this country—by planting our outposts here and there—that we can hope to arouse in the people that hunger for righteousness which is the only thing that will save their souls. The tide must be stemmed," said the clergyman, leaning back and eyeing Peter enthusiastically through his spectacles, "and only the clergy can stem it. I could tell you things. . . ."

Peter was not listening so attentively now; he was searching his mind for some way of getting rid of the beer left in the bottle without rousing the other's suspicions. For without doubt it was either poisoned or drugged; he had plainly seen the tiny pellet dropped in; and while the clergyman continued to oraculate

over the mission Peter marvelled anew at the perfection of his disguise. For obviously here was one of those attempts of which Tremayne had warned him, and he wondered what would happen if he suddenly accused the man of trying to poison him. Astonished incredulity, perhaps, or outraged indignation?—"My dear young man, I greatly fear that beer has upset you more than you realize." It was ten to one the man had some excuse ready, and Peter could not very well demand an analysis of the beer upon a mere suspicion. No, there was nothing to be gained by denunciation; the game to play was to pretend to drink the beer and await developments. He emptied his glass.

"There's no doubt a very great deal in what you say," he remarked, re-filling his glass and taking it in his hand. "Next time I visit Birmingham I must come and see how the mission is getting on." His jaw dropped suddenly and his eyes, goggling, stared over the clergyman's shoulder. "Who in the name of heaven is this!" he cried.

The clergyman spun round, and immediately Peter tipped his glass on to the carpet beside him. He was sitting next to the wall, and his action was invisible to anyone else in the room. By the time the clergyman had twisted himself back into his original position Peter was apparently draining his glass, still gazing over his companion's shoulder.

"Jove, that gave me a turn!" he gasped, as he set down the glass. "Thought I saw a man who was killed in the War. Is there anything, I wonder, more startling in the world than thinking you see a man who you thought was dead?"

"It is extraordinarily upsetting," agreed the clergyman, his eyes lingering for a moment on Peter's empty glass with an expression of satisfaction. "I remember once in my student days thinking I saw the ghost of my uncle—a singularly stout man and addicted to port, unfortunately—an hallucination which, if I remember aright, I attributed to salmon." He rose and bowed courteously. "You will excuse me, I'm sure," he said, and Peter watched his lean back disappear through the door with a faint feeling of admiration. He beckoned to the waiter.

"That clergyman I've been talking to—I know him quite well but can't recollect his name. Can you find out for me?"

"No. 47, sir—I'll inquire, sir." He came back presently with the information that it was a Mr. Septimus Tringle of Birmingham, and Peter stored the name in his memory for future reference.

The drug, or whatever it was with which the clergyman had tried to dope him, would not be one that was quick-acting, he decided, for it would never suit Mr. Tringle's book for Peter to be taken ill at table. What was more probable was that its strength had been nicely adjusted to exert its maximum effect at night, so that its victim would know nothing more than that he was overpoweringly sleepy.

He shuddered a little as he wondered what would have happened if he had not chanced to see that little movement of Mr. Tringle's hand.

He retired a little earlier than usual, for he wanted to make a thorough examination of his room. Almost at once he received a shock, for his air-pistol, which

he kept locked in his suitcase during the daytime, was gone. He looked carefully at the lock—it was one that any bunch of keys would probably open, and he blamed himself severely for leaving the pistol in a place so easy to burgle. Was Venning the culprit, he wondered, or Tringle, or both? Somehow he didn't associate Venning with that kind of work.

Presently he undressed and got into bed, putting a couple of heavy-headed golf-clubs near to his hand. He had examined all the cupboards and drawers, looked behind the wardrobe and washing-stand, seen that the door was locked and bolted, and finally he had inspected the window. It was on the second floor and had no balcony, the wall falling sheer to a garden rockery thirty feet below, as he had noticed by daylight. He did not think Mr. Tringle would pay him a visit from this direction. Nevertheless, he felt confident that it was Mr. Tringle's intention to visit him that night; indeed, he felt he would be disappointed if that gentleman failed to materialize. He had become greatly interested in the personality of Mr. Tringle.

For a little while he lay staring at the electric-light, pondering over the tangle of mysterious events of which he seemed to have become the centre. He had no fear that he would unexpectedly fall asleep, for his brain was as active as a fox-terrier's. How long his vigil would last he could only guess; he imagined Mr. Tringle would come to complete the good work begun by the drug about midnight. Switching off the light he composed himself to wait.

Half an hour passed—an hour—finally midnight struck somewhere in the town, and still there was no

sign of Mr. Tringle. It seemed to Peter that perhaps he had seen through the somewhat clumsy subterfuge he had adopted, and had left the hotel never to return, fearing Peter might hand him over to the police and have the remains of the bottle analysed. If that were so it looked as if he was going to have a peaceful night after all. Yet he still thought Mr. Tringle would come; that satisfied gleam in his eyes when he had glanced at the empty glass had been real, not simulated.

All at once he heard something fall softly on to the carpet. As noises go it was a mere nothing, and in ordinary circumstances it would probably never have arrested his attention. But in the state of disquiet induced by the discoveries of the evening his hearing was acutely sensitive, and he lay quiet as a mouse, his heart beating a little faster than usual, waiting for the noise to be repeated. Profound darkness filled the room—darkness in which the vague outline of the window hung ghost-like. Sure enough presently *plop* near the window again, very faint, followed by a peculiar slithering noise, like human hands feeling the surface of a door. A man was crawling along the floor on his hands and knees, very quietly! Or was it some kind of animal?

Peter gripped his mashie and waited, sitting up with one hand on the electric-switch. For a time the noise had ceased—the intruder, whoever he was, was listening. A plan suddenly presented itself to Peter. To remain in bed was asking for trouble; therefore he gave a strangled snore such as a man might make in turning over; at the same time he silently threw back the sheets and slipped from the bed on the side furthest

from that where he imagined the intruder to be hiding. Then he stood listening. He was convinced that to anyone else in the room it must have seemed that he had merely settled himself into a more comfortable position and continued to slumber. And presently he heard again the sound which had disturbed him, suggestive of someone stealing barefooted over the carpet.

Quietly he moved backwards until his hand came in contact with the edge of the washing-stand, and as quietly removed the soap from the soap bowl. Next, his questing fingers came upon the tooth-brush jar, and this too he removed soundlessly and tucked under his left arm. Then he approached the side of the bed, and leaning over the pillow, sought the electric-light switch that hung from the wall. Having found it he listened again, but the intruder was making no sound. Peter curled his fingers round the cake of soap; it was hard and dry—an excellent missile for his purpose. The course he was taking entailed a certain risk, for the intruder was certain to be armed, but he banked on the fact that a badly-startled man is for a few moments a man bereft of reason—and in those few moments Peter did not propose to remain idle.

He threw the soap at the window with all his force. The glass broke with a crack like a pistol-shot, and immediately Peter switched on the light, the china jar poised ready for instant discharge at the head of the intruder. The room leapt into being—empty. The closed door, the furniture, the window with its gaping black hole, the bed—Peter ran his eye rapidly over them, but there was nothing to be seen to account for the noise he had heard.

"Funny," he muttered, "I could have sworn—"

The next instant he drew in his breath sharply, the words transfixed in his throat, as he saw the loathsome object that sprawled along the floor half under the wardrobe. It was a snake, four feet long, thin almost as a whip, and bright green in colour, and as he gazed at it, horror-stricken, it was joined by another that writhed its way gently along the carpet, making the soft slithering noise that had attracted his attention. For perhaps two seconds he stood as if paralysed; then with a frantic bound, he leaped on to the bed.

From this comparatively safe vantage-point he counted no less than five of the creatures in different parts of the room, one actually being in the attitude of attempting to climb a leg of the bed. With its head poised motionless, its tiny eyes seemed to be watching Peter with an odd expression of wariness, until in a sudden fury of repulsion Peter picked up his mashie and slew it unscientifically but efficiently. The sight of its corpse encouraged him to pursue the next, which he did with the help of two chairs. Fortunately the snakes seemed only too anxious to avoid him making no effort to attack simultaneously, with the result that in a short time every one had its back broken. The slaughter, however, was attended by considerable noise, and Peter was not surprised when there came a knock at the door.

It was the night-porter, and when Peter let him in his face blanched. "Good Lord, sir," he gasped. "How did these get in?"

"Through the window unless I'm much mistaken," returned Peter. "By Jove, yes—look! there's a rope."

He pointed through the broken window, where a rope was plainly visible. "What numbers are above here?" he asked quickly.

The man considered. "Somewhere about 46 and 91," he replied thoughtfully.

"He's in 47," said Peter. "We'll have him out of it before he can escape. Come along."

He pushed past the astonished man into the corridor where the light was on, and several people in various stages of deshabille were standing at their doors.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded a stout gentleman indignant. "Are you aware you have disturbed half the hotel, sir?"

"So would you disturb half the hotel, my friend, if you had half a dozen snakes crawling up your legs." Peter could not resist saying.

A muffled scream came from inside the stout gentleman's room.

"Snakes, sir!" echoed the stout gentleman, turning pale and retreating. "What do you mean, sir? Louisa, pray be calm. How dare you try to frighten my wife, sir. Snakes, indeed!" he went on, from the shelter of his doorway. "How dare you have the impertinence to talk to me about snakes, sir. Brrrh!"

There was quite a litle crowd at Peter's heels as he reached the landing above and approached No. 47.

"What's the trouble about?" asked a young man with red hair and green pyjamas.

"Something about snakes, he said," volunteered a little man with a Yorkshire accent. "Say, lad, what's oop?"

Peter, however, did not reply, but rattled the door of

No. 47. "Open the door, please," he said in a peremptory voice.

"What's this?" demanded a fussy little man with a bald head, coming forward. "What's all the row about? Man, you're waking up everyone in the hotel!"

Peter ignored him. "Tringle, open this door!" he called angrily.

"Wouldn't it perhaps be better if you left it till to-morrow, sir," urged the night-porter, remembering his responsibilities.

"Stand clear!" cried Peter, and taking a little run he planted the sole of his foot (he had fortunately remembered to put on his slippers) over the lock of the door. At the second attempt the door burst inwards, and Peter darted in, feeling for the electric light as he went.

The room was empty. Tied to the foot of the bed was a rope which led to the open window.

"Gone!" said Peter bitterly.

## (11)

The following morning, when he had done interviewing managers and policemen, Peter went to the golf-club determined to try to come to some sort of understanding with Colonel Venning. He had come to the conclusion that the Colonel was on the same side of the game as himself, and after the attempt on his life he felt he wanted an ally. The difficulty was how to approach him. Then he remembered the sign, scratched on the wards of a key, which Bridgewater had used to

make himself known at Tregenneth, and he decided to try its effect on Venning.

Rain began to fall soon after breakfast, and he was relieved to find Venning at the club-house, deep in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"It's hopeless to-day I'm afraid, Bryan," he remarked with a glance out of the window at the leaden sky. "Enjoy your practice on the sands yesterday?"

"I think I've succeeded in straightening out that pull at last," replied Peter. "I stood a little more open, and they seemed to be keeping in a straight line for once."

"Good!" They talked golf jargon for a little while; then the Colonel said casually: "By the way, did you see that seaplane that came over soon after I had gone?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, it came down quite close to the sands. Rather a curious place to choose for a visit."

"Very. It didn't alight, I suppose?"

"There was no water anywhere near for it to alight on. It simply cruised backwards and forwards up and down the sands, almost as if—as if it was looking for someone."

"Really?—very curious thing to do in such an out-of-the-way place," was Venning's comment as he picked up the paper. Peter, watching his face slowly, could detect no other expression on it except perfunctory interest. He glanced quickly round the room. For the moment it was empty. He drew a score card from his pocket.

"D'you mind checking this, Colonel—it's my round yesterday," he said. "I rather think I only took four

at the dog-legged seventh—do you happen to remember?"

Venning's eyes fixed themselves expressionlessly on the card, in the corner of which Peter had drawn Bridgewater's sign—not obtrusively, but conspicuous enough to catch the eye.

"I daresay you're right," he said thoughtfully. "Good morning, Marsden," he broke off as the door opened and the secretary came in. "Not much chance of play to-day."

"Filthy weather!" said the cherubic secretary cheerfully. "Always is here with the wind in this quarter."

He sat down at a table and began to write a letter. Venning rose to his feet.

"Marsden's a pessimist," he declared. "I believe myself it's going to clear up after all. Come and have a look outside, Bryan."

Venning did not speak again until they were standing by the eighteenth green.

"Brown, the Rugger man, aren't you?" he asked, his keen eyes searching Peter's face.

"Yes."

"I've had my suspicions of you for some time," Venning went on, "but why do you make yourself known to me now?"

"For two reasons," said Peter. "Firstly, because Sir Mortimer Drude was in that seaplane that came over yesterday; secondly, because my life was attempted last night at my hotel."

Venning's face did not alter by the least movement. "Do you suppose Drude recognized you?" he inquired.

"I don't think so at the time, but after what happened last night I'm not so sure." Briefly Peter related the episode of the nonconformist parson. "I was warned my life might be attempted," he added, "but I hardly expected that kind of attempt." He gave a little laugh. "I can see that horrible snake trying to climb the leg of the bed still; I shall probably dream about it for days. I take it that Tringle is one of Drude's gang, of course."

"There's no doubt about that, and he's not the only one in the neighbourhood. That telephone message yesterday afternoon was a bogus one to get me out of the way, and it was the first intimation I had that my listening-post was discovered. You must leave the hotel, Brown, and come and stay with me, for unless my calculations are wrong matters are coming to a head." He gave one of his rare laughs. "Ours is a funny trade, Brown—though, as you're new to it, you may not see the humour of it in quite the same light as I do. You see, we never know our colleagues except in an emergency, and sometimes the most absurd mistakes arise. I don't mind admitting that when I found you outside my observation post yesterday I was silly enough to think for a few moments you were on the other side."

Peter laughed. "I confess I very nearly entertained similar suspicions about you," he admitted.

That afternoon he took up his quarters at the farm-house where Venning lived. It was a place suited to a man of the Colonel's solitary habits, for there was not another house within half a mile. It was kept by an elderly man and his wife who possessed the reserve

of people who had long lived apart from their kind, and they greeted Peter with the courtesy of a past century. Indeed, so old-fashioned was everything in that house that it was with a sense of incongruity that Peter came across an up-to-date wireless set, though he suspected it was not only for the entertainment of the old people that it had been installed.

One of the first things Venning did when the couple had retired to bed was to supply Peter with a small but serviceable-looking revolver. "I needn't tell you not to use it unless you're downright obliged," he said. "Personally, I always carry one at night—more for the confidence it gives than anything else. And let me give you a tip. In an emergency, carry it in your coat-pocket. The essential thing in dealing with the people we are up against is quickness, and unless you're an expert at the draw—which I don't suppose you are—you might as well carry your gun in your boots as on your hip for all the use it will be to you in a crisis. Do you feel like a stroll along the sands? Yes, I should bring it along if I were you."

Imperceptibly the older man had taken command, nor did Peter resent it. Venning was the professional, while he was only an amateur, and as they walked towards the shore he was glad rather than otherwise to be under authority. Venning had obviously had so much more experience in matters of this kind that it was futile to think of any other arrangement.

Darkness had fallen some time past as the two men descended the dunes on to the firm sand. There was no moon, and the night was so still that they could hear the faint honking of a motor on the main road

two miles away. Out to sea the tide was swiftly making with a faint murmuring sound as it stole over the mud-flats, while in the distance a dot of red light appeared and vanished with mechanical regularity, like the beating of a tiny pulse.

Venning presently left the sands again for the uneven surface of the dunes, until a darker patch against the dark sky told Peter they had reached the hut. There was a rattle of keys and a sound as of a door being opened; then a faint light appeared framed by the doorway.

"Come in," said Venning's voice, and he entered. The Colonel immediately closed the door.

There was little but bare boards to meet the eye inside. A table, on which there were a few books, a small electric lamp, a tin of cigarettes, and a newspaper; and an upright chest and a deck-chair comprised the furniture. There was also a cupboard, minus its doors, containing a bottle of whiskey, a siphon, a tin of cocoa and some glasses, together with a spirit-stove.

"I'm afraid I'm not equipped for hospitality," Venning said almost apologetically as he pushed over the cigarettes. "The glasses, however, are clean. Whiskey?"

"Thanks."

They pledged each other in silence, Peter noticing that his companion drank nothing but plain soda. Then, with a word of excuse, Venning bent over the floor and proceeded to prise up a couple of planks, revealing a cavity from which he took a telephone.

"Hello, hello—that you, Myers?" he called. "Yes,

speaking. Right. Right. No. I can't say. Very good, Myers—right." He rang off, replaced the telephone and stood up. "When you're ready, Brown," he said.

"Seeing if everything is O.K.?" Peter asked curiously. "Do you anticipate trouble to-night?"

"I expect it every night, my dear fellow. What exactly will happen I know very little more than you do, but this much I can tell you. I have excellent reason for believing that some night this week a certain mutual acquaintance of ours will visit these shores—here. Why he should choose this spot in all England, except that it's a pretty lonely one, I can't tell you. All I know is that I have received certain information that he may do so. Though you can't see them, I have a dozen men posted along these sand-hills, ready at any moment to obey my signal."

"You expect him from the sea?"

Venning nodded slowly. "And I have some reason to hope he won't come alone. It's a much bigger man than Sir Mortimer Drude I hope to have my hands on before the night's out. If my calculations are right this place will be the rendezvous for two of the biggest criminals in Europe—men beside whom Drude, Kreller, Zorloff and the rest are mere commonplace crooks. And one of them is the most dangerous scoundrel alive to-day—the old spider who is the centre of the whole vast web of criminal intrigue that stretches from Moscow to Lisbon. And we haven't the slightest clue to his identity. . . . Silly, isn't it?"

"But you say they know you are here? That bogus telephone message yesterday. . . ."

"They know I'm here, but they don't know how

many men I have under me. If I know anything of the kind of people we're dealing with, it won't be fear of one man that'll stop 'em coming. They'll come looking for trouble, I don't doubt. Please God, it'll be a different kind of trouble they'll find when they get here! Well, it's half-past eleven, and high tide is in an hour. It's time we were in our places."

He switched out the light and opened the door. Peter followed him over the dunes with a feeling of growing excitement.

(iii)

Never had Peter known a darker night. As he lay among the sand-hills half an hour later, his heart beating a little faster than usual with anticipation, the intense blackness closed upon him like something tangible in every direction. A slight drizzle of rain had begun to fall, so gently that any sound it made was lost in the murmur of the tide, which had now advanced beyond the level of the mud and was creeping up the sands, as Peter could tell by the *sh-sh-sh* at intervals of a breaking wave. Assuredly a fit night for evildoers to be abroad.

Somewhere near, within hailing distance, was Venning, armed and alert for any eventuality, as were the dozen or so men picketed along the shore; yet Peter could not rid himself of the feeling that he was alone. It was a creepy business, this waiting for someone to come out of the sea, and he wished it was over. The damp rain was beginning to chill his spirit. Unaccountably, too, he had developed a headache. He wondered

how long he would have to wait if no one came. Presumably it would be until the tide had turned, and ebbed far enough to preclude the possibility of a boat landing.

Suddenly his heart pounded, for clear and plaintive came from somewhere behind him the call of a night-bird, instantly bringing back to his memory that night when he stood among the shelter of the trees by the creek of Tregenneth, waiting for Horstman and his men. It was the same cry—he remembered noting the peculiar sound of it at the time and wondering what kind of bird had uttered it—and the significance of it brought him to his feet with a rush. Venning must know at once what it portended.

A moment's reflection, however, showed the foolishness of such a course. It was almost certain that the night-bird's cry had reached the ears of the Colonel, who, whether he knew its true meaning or not, would need no warning from him as to the possible importance of such an unexpected sound. To go blundering across the dunes in the inky blackness might only inform their enemies that a watch was being kept, besides upsetting Venning's plans, and Peter resolved to keep to his original instructions, which were to remain where he was until ordered, or actually attacked.

He stood listening, revolver in hand, but as the minutes passed and the call was not repeated, he began to wonder if he had not perhaps been mistaken. After all, he knew nothing about night-birds and their calls. He felt his ears tingling as he thought what a fool he would have looked if he had sought Venning with such a story, and it turned out to be a false alarm.

His headache forced itself on his attention once more—it was almost as if a band had been fastened round his head and suddenly tightened—and for a moment he felt giddy. It struck him that he must be out of sorts, and he was on the point of resuming his seat when it was borne upon him, with a renewed quickening of excitement, that he could hear, over and above the complaining of the sea, a peculiar throbbing noise. Immediately afterwards he was sure of it—somewhere over the waste of waters a motor boat was moving.

The drizzling rain had ceased by now, and he stared into the darkness in the direction of the sound until his eyeballs ached with the strain, while the throbbing grew steadily louder. A light appeared out to sea—a pin-point in the screen of darkness. He stared at it as if hypnotized; then the light seemed to give a sickening dive, and he remembered no more.

The first thing he realized when he recovered consciousness was that he was bound hand and foot. It was still dark, but lights were moving about near him, and he was aware of the proximity of men. He discovered that he was lying on his back on the sands, but his head was free, and by twisting it round he could make out similar forms beside him that were also prone. Venning's men! The bitter truth dawned on him instantly. They were prisoners—prisoners in the hands of Sir Mortimer Drude it was more than likely. Clearly Venning had been outwitted—but how in the name of sanity had it been accomplished? He remembered his last conscious moments—the intolerable

headache, traces of which still remained. Had his food been doped, he wondered? And then he caught sight of one of the men moving about a short distance away, and he guessed what had happened, for the man wore a queer-shaped headgear that sent Peter's mind back to the War—it was a gas-mask! He had been gassed—presumably they had all been gassed, and the night-bird's call had been the signal that the deed was done. Even in the ignominy of defeat he was conscious of a faint satisfaction that he had not been deceived in this respect.

His interest became fixed on what was occurring near him. There seemed to be a considerable number of men present—a dozen at least—and it looked as if they were engaged in erecting something on the sands, for there were various goings to and fro to the sea, where a group of lights suggested the presence of a small boat. As the men became momentarily visible against the light on the sands Peter could see that they all wore gas-masks, and it struck him that they were fitting up some kind of gun. He recollected the five-mile stretch of sand that ran straight as a Roman highway, and Sir Mortimer's survey of it from a sea-plane, and all at once he thought he saw light. Was Sir Mortimer about to give one of his "demonstrations"? Fantastic as the thing seemed, it certainly fitted the facts so far as he knew them. If Sir Mortimer wished to give a secret trial to some engine of destruction which necessitated a level stretch of several miles long, there could be no better place than these sands—in England at any rate—though it was strange that he should make such an attempt knowing, as the

gassing of Venning and his men proved that he did know, that his operations were suspected.

He became aware that two figures had detached themselves from the group and were walking in his direction. One of them struck a match, which burnt steadily in the still air, and then appeared to remove his mask.

"It's clear now," said a voice which Peter had no difficulty in recognizing as Sir Mortimer's.

The other evidently followed his companion's example, for he replied in a refined, drawling voice: "A useful gas, this of yours, Mortimer, but dangerous to handle, I should imagine. It has no smell at all, you say?"

"None," answered the scientist. "It gives no warning at all, so far as I have been able to ascertain. Its composition is no secret, for something very similar was used by the British forces during the War. Its chief merit lies in its variability for punitive purposes. Administered in a certain form the merest whiff is death. To-night, however, it was sufficiently mild to induce temporary unconsciousness only. Taafe did his work well."

"You are wise," rejoined the other. "There is nothing to be gained by unnecessarily irritating the official forces of the law. Where's this man you spoke of?"

"Here," said Sir Mortimer, and an electric torch was flashed in Peter's face. "Ah, so you have come round, have you, Mr. Peter Brown?"

Peter blinked at the light. "Will you be good enough to tell me who you are, and why I am in this position?" he asked, after a pause.

"All in good time, Mr. Brown, all in good time. You do not recognize my voice, then?"

"I do now," said Peter grimly. "Staying at Seabridge, Sir Mortimer?"

"I have not that pleasure," was the silky reply. "Had I been, I am under the impression you would not be here to-night, Mr. Brown. It is the old story: if you want a thing done well, do it yourself. A certain friend of mine bungled rather badly last night. Now I should not have bungled."

"I thought at the time it was one of your playful experiments," murmured Peter. "Have you got any more in store for me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Brown, certainly—why not? Your friend Colonel Venning and his brave men—well, I have no particular quarrel with them, and I have just given them another sniff of gas which will keep them quiet for a little while. To-morrow they will awake in the same positions as they were gassed, and will all probably wonder how on earth they ever came to fall asleep at their posts. You, however, will not be among them."

"Really?" said Peter. "How do you know?"

"Because, my dear Mr. Brown, I intend to have you thrown—alive—into the mud of the River Yatt."

The words were uttered in such a conversational tone that the meaning took several seconds to sink into Peter's brain. Sir Mortimer mistook his silence for fear, for he went on:

"That makes your cheek blanch, eh? I am told the mud is twelve feet deep in places—and you won't float, you know. No doubt the mud shifts in the course

of time, and perhaps in a few years to come some fisherman may find a few old bones and rags which may be identified or may not. In any case, it will not trouble me. And I am sure it won't trouble my niece."

"Your niece?' repeated Peter slowly.

"The lady upon whose good-nature you so cruelly imposed," said Sir Mortimer quietly. "Let me assure you that she has bitterly regretted her action in helping you to escape. In fact, I have been compelled to—er—to take certain measures with regard to her for which I am sorry. You see, she defied me. And I do not like being defied."

"You damnable villain!" cried Peter, roused at last. "What have you done to her?"

"I have merely put her where she will be under no temptation to thwart my plans," was the calm reply. "If you wish to know, she is imprisoned on an island."

"If you so much as hurt a hair of her head—" Peter began furiously, and then stopped, conscious of the emptiness of the threat. Sir Mortimer laughed.

"I hardly think you will be in a position to do me any harm, Mr. Brown," he said blandly. "For, you see, in a couple of hours' time you will be dead. There is no doubt about it, I assure you. You are like the brave man in Newbolt's poem—'untroubled of hope'. In fact, so certain am I of your decease that I am going to let you witness an experiment. You were always interested in my discoveries, Mr. Brown, weren't you? —well, to-night you shall see how one of them operates. Good-bye for the present."

He turned away, followed by the other man, who had not opened his mouth during this colloquy. Peter

was left a prey to mingled feelings. On the face of things his number was clearly up, with the prospect of a horrible death in front of him, yet he refused to despair. Once before he had been faced with death at Sir Mortimer's hands and had miraculously escaped, and his position was a no worse one now—indeed, it was rather better, for there was yet time for him to set his wits to work and devise some means of avoiding the fate prepared for him. And in the meantime he was at last going to learn whether Sir Mortimer's vaunted knowledge was capable of producing material results. His curiosity to know what was about to happen was so great that he almost forgot his fear.

He wondered who was the scientist's companion. He spoke perfect English as if it was his own tongue, yet Peter could not help wondering if it was the mysterious individual whom Venning had described as the biggest criminal in Europe. As he recalled the lazy, drawling tones of his voice there came to him a conviction, which had not been present previously, that it was one with which he was vaguely familiar, and he searched his memory for the occasion upon which he had heard it before.

He did not dwell for long on the problem, however, for his thoughts were switched into an entirely different direction by the darkness being suddenly pierced by a searchlight. It seemed to come from the machine which he had supposed to be a gun. The white beam wavered a little over the sea and came to rest on the slopes of Whale Head, two miles away. While Peter wondered what its appearance portended, another beam, violet in colour, sprang into existence from somewhere

among the sand-hills; this, too, hovered and settled on Whale Head. For a few minutes the two searchlights, the white and the violet, remained concentrated on the same place; then, as Peter watched, yet a third ray, vivid green this time, shot up into the sky from another point, and commenced to sink slowly down towards the headland.

As it descended it seemed to the wondering Peter that a sudden hush fell on the group near him; he was subconsciously aware of tenseness, as if everyone was bracing himself to receive a shock. The green ray reached the point of concentration, and remained there. For two seconds there was a strained silence; then the amazing thing happened.

A vast tongue of fire leapt to heaven from the hillside like a gigantic candle-flame, dissolving the darkness on the instant into a kind of yellowish daylight in which the sea, the headland, the shore, and the men on it were visible as in a nightmarish picture of yellow monochrome. It flamed silently and magnificently for a space of time that a man might count five; then, with a shattering roar and a vibration that shook the earth even at that distance, the disturbance reached the group on the sands. The searchlights went out immediately; the flame vanished into the sky; and in the darkness, above the wind which had risen, was heard a curious sound like shingle being drawn down the beach by the backwash of a wave. And then came the sea.

It is strange to reflect that the group on the sands had omitted to prepare for this perfectly natural outcome of their experiment. Peter put it down to that

absence of practical application which is popularly supposed to be typical of the scientific mind. Whatever the cause of this lack of foresight, the huge wave, when it came, clearly caught the experimenters by surprise, and it was certainly due more to luck than management that no one was drowned.

As it was the wave rocked the motor-boat like a cockleshell, and went surging up the beach as far as the sand-dunes. The group were wet through to the skin, as were Peter and his fellow captives. Fortunately for them it was only the first wave that was such a great size; those that followed did not reach halfway up the sands.

In the darkness Peter could hear men running about, and presently lights flickered, converging on the edge of the sea. The experiment was over, and the experimenters were re-embarking. There was some trouble in starting the engine, but at length it fired with a splutter, and the men seemed to be crowding into the boat. Hope rose in Peter's heart. Perhaps he was being forgotten in the confusion caused by the miniature tidal-wave. But this hope was doomed to disappointment, for soon after the motor-boat had left the shore a car was started behind the sand-hills, and two men approached him. He was gagged with a handkerchief and carried to an open touring-car, into which he was unceremoniously thrown. The car started at once, and Peter perceived it was heading in the direction of the river.

In the car he made a supreme but ineffectual effort to free himself. He tried hard not to think of his coming fate, but all the while he saw in imagination

the banks of the Yatt, thick with soft grey mud, and steep as a railway cutting, with the dirty tidal river running between at the bottom. With his hands and feet tied he would be helpless and sink at once—but he would not die at once. That was the worst thought of all. There would be a few moments—a whole minute, perhaps—when his face would have sunk below the mud, and he would be conscious, holding his breath, waiting for the dreadful moment when the intolerable pressure on his lungs forced his mouth open. . . .

The car stopped and he was lifted out and carried over some level ground. He could smell the mud now. He made a final unavailing effort to break his bonds; then his captors stopped and, one holding his feet and one his shoulders, they began to swing him. One—two—three—four—then a mighty heave; and our Mr. Brown described a half-circle through the air, to land with a sickening squelch into the mud of the River Yatt.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CLERGYMAN WHO DIED

### (1)

In that awful moment, as he landed face downwards in the mud, Peter gave himself up for lost. So powerful was the instinct of self-preservation, however, that even as he felt the slap of the wet mud in his face he struggled, bound as he was, to turn on to his back, though the movement could at most result in adding

only a few minutes to life. The effort ploughed him deep in the mud, but he succeeded, and lay gasping through the handkerchief, which had in one way proved useful, for it prevented the mud from choking up his mouth and nostrils. But mud was in his eyes and ears, mud pressed against his sides, clung to his legs and gripped his feet; and as he felt himself sinking deeper a frenzy of horror seized him, and he struggled like a maniac, until the impotence of it came over him, and he stopped, exhausted. The mud was over his neck.

And then a mood of fatalism swept over him, and he determined to struggle no more. It was the finish of the course, and he would try and meet it like a man. He prayed that the end would come quickly—and then once again there rose in him the desire to struggle frantically, and he fought it down, hard. The mind, at such moments, thinks of queer things, and his imagination conjured up a picture of a fly caught by a spider—the impotent struggles at intervals, gradually growing fewer and feebler as the spider increases its hold. He felt like that fly—only he would not struggle. He prayed again that he would not give way to panic—like the pitiful fly.

All at once his pulses raced with the tenth part of a hope. It struck him that for the moment he had ceased to sink. For the first time he forced open his eyes. He had to close them again immediately, but by blinking rapidly he succeeded in shaking some of the mud from his lids, and at length he was able to keep them open. The drizzle had come on again, and he could see nothing. With a terrible anxiety he waited.

Had he stopped sinking or not? The suspense was agonizing; and then, as he found part of his head was still uncovered, hope flamed up again in his heart. Scarcely daring to breathe he thought things over: either he had come up against a layer of harder mud, which might soften with the warmth of his body, or else the mud was only of a slight depth, and he was resting on firm sand. His hands were bound behind his back, and with his fingers he tried to feel the consistency of the substance that was bearing his weight. He discovered hardness; it might be caked mud or sand, but for the moment it was clear that he had ceased to sink.

The revulsion of feeling was so great that life seemed to spread itself out before him with unusual sweetness. He forced down the inclination to dwell upon the future, and tried to concentrate on the present. If he was lying on sand covered by a mere veneer of mud, as he was beginning to be convinced he was, then he would be safe until someone found him. He had no fear of the tide, for it had been approximately high-water when he was thrown in. But would anyone find him, half-buried as he was, even in daylight? It was not at all certain, for the Yatt was a lonely river. He realized that he must try to extricate himself by his own exertions. It occurred to him that he might roll up the bank. It would be an unpleasant business and there was the danger of coming across a deeper patch of mud, but he considered it worth attempting. First of all, though, he must try sitting up.

It was one of the hardest physical efforts Peter had ever made. The mud seemed loth to let its prisoner

go. Strong as his abdominal muscles were, they ached with the strain. He could lift up his legs but could not move his trunk. Once, in the midst of his efforts, he desisted in a sudden fright, under the impression that he had sunk in deeper. At last he was forced to the conclusion that the feat was impossible. There remained rolling.

He began by trying to turn over on one side, but what had been easy when he lay on the surface of the mud he now found to be extraordinarily difficult. He could turn his head easily enough, but move his body laterally he could not. The mud held him fast. He lay back for a while, considering. The only satisfaction he had got out of his efforts was the confirmation of his suspicion that he was on firm sand, for he had sunk in no further. For a time he kept motionless, husbanding his strength for a new effort.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the darkness grew less. Presently he could make out the dark bank of mud, sloping like the roof of a house above him. The sky began to lighten and he could soon perceive the stark outline of Whale Head in front of him. This gave him his bearings and at the same time made his heart sink, for it told him he was in a part of the river where no chance visitor was likely to come. In half an hour's time the whole cheerless prospect lay before him—high banks of brown-grey mud, steep as a railway-cutting, with the slate-coloured Yatt running swiftly seaward at the bottom. The sky was heavily overcast, full of the promise of more rain. Only one grain of comfort did the daylight reveal—he was several feet above high-tide mark and not in danger of drowning.

Twice during the next hour Peter struggled to move his position with no result. Gulls, past-masters in the art of acrobatic flying, swooped over him, and once a particularly courageous one alighted on his chest, only to jump off in a panic as Peter gave a muffled shout. Its presence suggested a contingency upon which he did not dare dwell. It was shortly after this that he heard the first sign of human activity. The course of the Yatt was so devious that he could not see the ferry, which was half a mile away, but he knew its whereabouts, and when he heard a faint hail in the distance he guessed some early riser was waiting to cross. There would be much traffic on the ferry-boat that morning, he surmised, for thousands of people must have heard the noise of the explosion, and they would be sure to visit the scene of it if they could. It would be a nine days' wonder, for no one could possibly guess the cause of it, and it would probably be put down to some freak of the elements. Venning and his men, if they were alive, might have their suspicions, but they would not broadcast them; indeed, they would probably say as little as possible about the night's work, for their part in it had hardly been a distinguished one. He wondered if they would organize a search for him. The probability was that they would assume he had been taken prisoner. The prospect was not bright.

The morning wore on. The river dwindled to a muddy trickle and commenced to fill again. No one came near, and a kind of apathy gripped Peter. It looked as if he had escaped suffocation only to die of starvation and exposure. At intervals he tried to move,

but the mud was a safe gaoler. A mood of despair came over him at last, and he made no further efforts.

(11)

As Peter had surmised, the inhabitants of Seabridge, awakened at one o'clock in the morning by an appalling explosion that shattered half the window-panes in the town, thought of earthquakes. Those who happened to have been lying awake when it occurred, however, agreed that a terrific flash of light had preceded it, and were inclined to put it down to a gigantic thunderbolt. For an hour or more the streets were dotted with people discussing the phenomenon, but as it was not repeated, they presently went back to bed. It was in the morning, at breakfast, that excitement rose high again in boarding-houses and apartments, for strange rumours were flying about. It was said that a foreign warship had attempted to bombard Seabridge in the night; some averred that they had heard the hum of aeroplanes, and talked darkly of another war; while not a few saw in the occurrence yet another instance of the Government's weakness in not dealing more firmly with the Red menace. . . .

But at length rumour thickened in one particular direction, and it soon became generally known that a mysterious attempt had been made to blow up part of Whale Head. The chars-a-bancs and motor-boat proprietors did a thriving trade that morning, while the ferryman at the mouth of the Yatt found himself utterly unable to cope with the hundreds of people

who demanded passages, and one fears that there was a certain amount of profiteering. It has been estimated that over nine thousand persons visited the scene of the explosion during the day and gazed wonderingly at the huge crater—the main part of St. Paul's could have dropped in it with ease—that had appeared on the hillside.

But while it was a great day for the transport-owners, there were others to whom it brought bitter humiliation. One would prefer to draw a kindly veil over the feelings of Colonel Venning and his men when they awoke in the grey dawn to find themselves trussed in a row like a lot of fowls. No mention of their plight fortunately got into the Press, for as it happened one of their number—it was a man named Myers, the same man Venning had rung up in Peter's presence the previous night—was not bound so securely as the rest and succeeded in releasing himself.

One gathers that there was not much said as the man Myers cut the ropes that bound the others. Venning, I have been told, looked a haggard old man when he realized what had happened to him. When he found that Peter was missing it was as if he had received a blow. He seemed utterly bewildered. The marks on the sands, which might have helped him to draw some conclusion as to what had taken place, had, of course, been washed out by the wave that followed the explosion. Only a few footprints and the faint mark of a boat's keel told him that his enemies had come and gone by the sea.

It was while he was dejectedly looking at the footprints that an exclamation from one of his men caused

him to turn sharply. The man was staring at Whale Head.

"Look there, sir," he said in a startled voice. "That wasn't there yesterday."

They were the first people to reach the crater—the vanguard of that vast army of sightseers that trooped to Whale Head in the course of the next few days.

By the time their speculations were exhausted—and, needless to say, not one theory bore the slightest relation to the true facts—Venning was himself again.

"We must find Brown," he said. "He may be lying helpless somewhere near."

But though they searched diligently enough not a trace of Peter Brown could they find.

. . . . .

It was one of the ferryman's assistants, hastily summoned from Yattbridge to meet the growing demands of the ferry, who discovered Peter. It was by this time well past noon, and he was floating down-stream on the ebb with an oar over the stern of his boat by way of rudder. According to his own account it was by the merest accident that he noticed Peter at all, his attention being principally occupied in steering the boat. He quickly drew in to one side, and having got out and pulled his boat a little way up the mud, he climbed the steep bank. There was no danger in this, for in that part of the river the mud was nowhere more than a foot deep, though it was as deep as ten feet in other places.

His first thought was that it was a corpse which he had found. The middle part of the body was entirely

below the surface of the mud, only the toes and the head being visible, and the eyes were shut. As he gazed on his discovery, however, the eyes opened and a low moaning sound came from behind the handkerchief.

"You could 'ave knocked me down with a feather," the ferryman's assistant used to say when relating the incident. "I tell yer it didn't 'arf give me a turn an' all. All tied round 'is face with a pocket-'ankerchief, 'e was. Gagged, ah! And when I come to pick 'im up blest if 'e wasn't bound 'ard an' fast, too! 'Lor lumme, mate,' I says. 'An' 'ow long 'ave you been 'ere, might I ask?'

"He couldn't answer for a bit—not even arter I got the 'ankerchief off of 'is face, 'e couldn't—but 'e kinder grinned like when I got out me knife and cut 'is ropes. 'Thank you,' 'e says, just like that, and tries to get on 'is 'ind legs—I'd got 'im up the bank by then—an' down 'e goes agin all of a blessed 'eap. I starts a-rubbin' of 'is legs to get the surkylation back, an' 'e says 'Don't—not yet,' like as if it 'urt 'im. Mud! Lord, 'e was a sight; I never see so much mud on a chap in me life.

"By and by 'e looks down at me boat and says: 'Did you walk up there?' 'Yes,' I says, wonderin', 'why?' 'Nothin',' 'e says, 'only I thought it was deeper, an' so did them as chucked me in.' 'Chucked you in?' I says. 'You ain't pullin' me leg, I suppose—not one of these 'ere movie men, are you?'

"'E gives a little laugh. 'No,' 'e says, 'I'm not a movie man.' Then 'e asked me the time, an' when I told 'im 'e seemed surprised—thought it was later-like. 'Look 'ere,' 'e says, 'kin you keep a secret?'

'O' course I can,' I says. 'Well, then,' 'e says, 'keep quiet about findin' me an' I'll make it worth your while.' An' blow me if 'e didn't give me a quid an' all! O' course you chaps won't say nothin' to nobody. . . . ."

Thus Mr. Ted Morgan, greengrocer's assistant and sometimes ferryman, in the bar of the "Blue Boar" at Yattbridge, encouraged by the pints of kind friends. Everyone was kind to Mr. Morgan, and signified affection in the usual manner, but there was one man whose kindness took a different form. Getting the garrulous Mr. Morgan into a corner he slipped half a crown into his hand.

"Look here, I'm a detective," he said in a low voice. "And I'm specially interested in this man you rescued. Which way did he go when he left you?"

"Wish way?" repeated Mr. Morgan, blinking perplexedly. "Wish way did 'e go?"

"Yes," nodded the kind stranger. "Did he go back to Seabridge?"

"Did 'e go—back Seebree'?" said Mr. Morgan with a hiccough, "now you're arsked me summat. Lemme shee now!"

"You watched him go, of course?"

"Washt 'im go—corsh I washt 'im go! 'Don't tell nobody,' 'e saysh, an' gives me a quid. A whole—blessed quid! Nor I 'aven't—tol' nobody. Wan' me tell you?" he demanded with sudden suspicion.

"No, no," said the stranger soothingly. "I only want to know which direction he took."

"Oh, thash all ri'," returned Mr. Morgan, "thash

en-entirely diff' thing. Wish way did 'e go? Now lemme she. 'E went—"

"Over towards the sands, eh?"

"Thash ri'. Over—over tor' sands. Nishe feller!"

Perceiving the unlikelihood of getting anything further out of Mr. Ted Morgan in his present happy state, the stranger left the "Blue Boar" and proceeded slowly down the lane outside. Presently he was joined by another man.

"Learnt anything?" inquired the new-comer.

"Very little," was the reply. "The filthy pig's as drunk as an owl. It looks as if Brown went off towards Venning's place."

"Better give up for the present, hadn't we?" suggested the new-comer. "We shan't catch them napping a second time.

"I will *not* give it up," returned the other, in whose voice Peter, had he been listening, might have traced a likeness to the Rev. Septimus Tringle. "D'you think I'm going to let two hundred pounds go begging for want of trying?"

"You've tried twice, anyhow" grumbled the new-comer. "And he got away both times."

"The third time it'll be my turn to win. The fool seems to have as many lives as a cat. Who would have supposed the mud was only a foot deep just there?"

"Horstman won't be pleased when he hears about it, I might tell you. Failure isn't a popular word in his vocabulary."

The man who had entertained Mr. Ted Morgan cursed Horstman with great heartiness.

"There won't be any question of failure," he said

emphatically. "It's true he'll probably tell a good many people about last night, and as far as I'm concerned I thought it a fool trick on Drude's part to let him see the experiment. There's no harm done, however."

"Unless he recognized—"

He stopped significantly. The other shook his head.

"He couldn't possibly," he replied sharply, "it was dark as pitch."

"I was referring more to his voice."

"When I've finished with Master Peter Brown he'll be past worrying about voices," was the grim answer.

(III)

Peter was so exhausted and numbed from his immersion in the mud that when he had parted from his garrulous rescuer he could scarcely put one foot before the other. His way lay across several large and marshy fields, and as he plodded doggedly on he could see, in the distance, a concourse of chars-a-bancs and motor-cars at the foot of Whale Head, and people like ants climbing the lower slopes of the hill.

Gradually the exercise restored his circulation and at the same time raised his spirit. He began to see glimmerings of humour in the situation. There was certainly irony in the fact that he was still alive, for it was unlikely that Sir Mortimer would have allowed him to witness what was evidently a demonstration of the potentialities of one of his discoveries, unless he was confident of his immediate decease.

No one met him as he crossed the field towards the

house where Venning lived, and he thought it just as well, for his dreadful appearance would only have aroused curiosity, and it was obvious that the fewer people who knew about his misadventure the better.

It chanced that Venning was standing in the lane talking to a police-inspector as he approached, and it amused Peter to notice that he was quite unrecognized.

"Well, my man, what can I do for you?" demanded the Inspector, surveying the mud-covered apparition which had stopped before him. "Been having a mud-bath, haven't you?"

"Don't you know me, Venning?" said Peter with a grin.

"Good God—Brown!" gasped the Colonel. "But—where in the name of Heaven have you been?"

"In the mud," said Peter. "Chucked there last night by some mutual friends of ours."

"In the mud?" cried Venning incredulously.

"Bless you, yes—stayed there all night. Nice place, the Yatt, for a night's lodging. Especially when you're bound and gagged like I was!"

He smiled cheerfully at the astonished policeman.

"This is Mr. Brown—Inspector Tolley," said Venning, recovering himself. "We've been hunting for you all morning. But come along inside, man, you must be famished!"

"I'd rather have a bath first if you don't mind—I feel rather—clammy," said Peter.

Half an hour later, clad once more in respectable garments, he was telling his story to the two men in between the intervals of making a hearty meal. Venning made only one interruption, and that was when

Peter, repeating the conversation he had had with Sir Mortimer on the sands, mentioned that the scientist had imprisoned his niece on an island.

"An island," he said thoughtfully. "That's interesting. Please go on."

When Peter had finished, the Colonel rose and stood with his back to the fireplace, filling his pipe.

"There's almost a kind of fate in the way you escape from Sir Mortimer's hands," he said. "If I were a fatalist I should say it looked as if it was ordained that you should be spared to put a spoke in his game."

"To tell you the truth, I'm rather sorry for Sir Mortimer," Peter observed; "the poor devil has so obviously got bats in the belfry. It's his chief of staff, Horstman, and one or two others, I'm reserving my dislike for."

"It's a lucky thing they chose that spot for you," said the Inspector. "There's a dozen feet of mud up by the mouth. Could you describe the two men or their car?"

"The car was an open four-seater. As for the men, they never spoke, and it was too dark to see their faces."

"How many men came in the motor-boat?" asked Venning.

"About a dozen, I should say."

"Was Horstman among them?"

"I didn't see him."

"Now about this man who was with Sir Mortimer. You say you formed the impression that you had heard his voice before. Can't you try and think where it was or under what circumstance?"

"I tried as I lay in that confounded mud, and it was no use," returned Peter with a slight laugh. "My idea is that I've heard him speaking—making a speech—somewhere—but it's only the vaguest of notions. Perhaps I shall come across it by accident—these fugitive memories often crop up when you're not looking for them—perhaps not."

"I hope you will, for there's no doubt he is the man I told you of—the master criminal of the gang Sir Mortimer is dealing with. I rather think Sir Mortimer's remaining tenure of life will be a short one."

"You mean—"

"I mean that now Sir Mortimer has convinced him that his discoveries are of such extraordinary power, he's not likely to pay through the nose for what he can just as easily get by simpler methods. The only thing that will prolong Sir Mortimer's life is the ability to convince the gang that he has further secrets up his sleeve. Before that time comes, let's hope the whole lot will be laid by the heels, and the discoveries put in the hands of reputable scientists."

"It will have to be done by cunning. Those rays . . . an army would wither before them like saplings in a tornado."

"Undoubtedly," Venning agreed, "but you must bear in mind that poisons have their antidotes. The more powerful the gun the thicker the armour, and I have no doubt there is a defence against all artificial destruction. Perhaps defence is the more difficult problem at the present time, but it always levels up. And there is another thing. I gather that the zone of danger is only at the point of concentration of the

three rays. I take it that there are certain peculiar properties in these rays that are harmful only when they combine. Obviously there are difficulties in the way of handling such a weapon in its present state."

"Difficulties which may be overcome."

"Perhaps. But, remember, Sir Mortimer isn't the inventor of the weapon; remember the strange circumstances—fantastical, if you like—under which it has come into his possession. The thing has come to him ready made, so to speak; he is merely copying instructions out of a book. Or, if you like, making and assembling the parts according to the blue-print. Is it likely that he, with his limited knowledge of scientific possibility, will be able to improve on the work of beings as far superior to him in knowledge as we are to the Phœnicians?"

The Inspector smothered a yawn and looked out of the window. Obviously the conversation had drifted beyond his level of interest. Colonel Venning re-lit his pipe, which had gone out.

"Well, Inspector, I think that's all that can be done for the present," he said. "If you discover anything else, come round and let me know, will you?"

"One moment, Inspector!" said Peter. "Has anything further been heard of the clergyman who was so kind as to put snakes in my bedroom at the 'Royal' the night before last?"

"God bless my soul!" said the Inspector. "Was that you, too? You seem to have been in the wars lately, and no mistake. No, they haven't heard anything more of him so far as I know. Cleared out of here by now, I should think."

"I don't know," said Peter slowly. "I have a shrewd suspicion that he was one of the men who threw me into the mud. You know the queer feeling one gets that a certain person is near—well, although I couldn't see him and he was mum as a mute, I had that feeling then. I confess I should like to meet the Rev. Septimus Tringle again."

When the Inspector had gone Peter turned to Venning.

"What did you mean by that interjection of yours when I mentioned that about the island?" he asked.

"It was only a passing thought," said the Colonel. "Sir Mortimer owned a house on Sark some years ago. I remember reading about it in his dossier. So far as I remember he never lived in it himself. He sold it soon after the War, though, so it couldn't be the same.

## (iv)

"Colonel, have you ever had the feeling that you are being watched?" asked Peter, as they sat at supper that night.

"Oh, yes—nerves mostly. Why, d'you feel like that now?"

"I do. I've had the feeling ever since I sat down to supper. It may be nerves—I don't say it isn't—but it's there, nevertheless."

He glanced uneasily out of the window, where the setting sun was tinting the western sky to gold. Colonel Venning smiled.

"A good night's rest will put you right," he said. "You're still suffering from the efforts of your involuntary mud-bath."

"I dare say," Peter replied absently.

"It's nearly half-past nine," said Venning presently. "Let's hear the news. It'll be interesting to hear what they have to say about this affair."

He rose and switched on the loud-speaker. After a pause a pleasant voice began to speak.

"This is London station calling the British Isles," it announced. "We have been requested by Scotland Yard to broadcast the following. The police are anxious to trace the whereabouts of the relatives of Mrs. John Matchup, who died in Helminster Infirmary in August last year. Any friends or relatives of the deceased are requested to communicate at once with the nearest police station, or with New Scotland Yard, S.W.1. Now here is the weather forecast—"

But Peter was not listening to the weather forecast, for he had caught sight of Venning's face, and it had whitened perceptibly. Immediately the Colonel rose and switched off the loud-speaker.

"I must go at once," he said hurriedly. "That message was for me."

"Not—bad news, I hope?"

Venning shook his head. "No, no—not family news. I can't tell you what it is—indeed, I don't know. But it means I must go at once."

"Can I help?"

"Not this time; I must go alone. Stay on here for a few days if you like."

"If you go, I go," said Peter. "There's no point in my stopping on here."

It did not take Colonel Venning long to make his arrangements, for in ten minutes his two-seater was at the front door.

"Good-bye, Brown," he said, as they shook hands. "Take care of yourself. I expect we shall meet again very shortly."

Left to himself, Peter experienced a sense of depression. After the adventures of the last few days he felt that anything else would be in the nature of an anti-climax. For some minutes he sat listening to the wireless programme, but the music seemed flat and uninteresting. Presently that curious sense of being watched, which he put down to nerves, returned to him, and he determined to go to bed. Tired as he was, however, he felt so restless that he was convinced he would never sleep, and it occurred to him that a short walk might induce that state of immediate physical fatigue in which sleep comes easiest. He looked to his revolver—he was taking no chances—and decided that a stroll as far as the main road and back would meet the case.

At the garden gate he stopped to fill his pipe. As he felt for his matches something like a great beetle sung past his head and hit the brickwork of the cottage with a crack. The instant he heard it he ducked and ran, doubled up, along the lane till he was past the farm; then he plunged into an orchard on the same side of the road as that from which the bullet had come. There he drew his revolver and pressed back the safety catch.

It was almost dark by now; there was just sufficient light for him to avoid the tree trunks as he stole rapidly and silently to the back of the orchard. Upon reaching it he dropped prone and continued to wriggle his way forward until he arrived at the stone wall which divided the orchard from the farmyard. With his cap well over his eyes and his coat collar up, he raised himself until he could see over. But though the roofs of the buildings were outlined against the sky, the lower parts were in deep shadow, in which all detail was lost. There was no sign of the man who had fired the shot.

Across the road the light from the room he had just left gleamed dully through the yellow curtain. It was evident that the old people were within listening to the music—indeed, from where he was he could faintly hear the strains of a fox-trot.

For a quarter of an hour or more Peter waited as still as a mouse, but his enemy gave no sign. As on the preceding night when he had awaited bigger game, it was very quiet, the light wind which blew across the flats making little sound. This silence was all at once broken by a little click and a noise like the twanging of a bow-string, and Peter smiled, for the twanging noise died away in the opposite direction. What it was his enemy was firing at he could not conceive, but it was certainly not him.

Peter climbed the wall and tiptoed as quietly as he knew how in the direction of the sound. He was beginning to enjoy the hunt, and hoped his enemy would continue to advertise his position by firing at imaginary targets. Behind the angle of a barn he crept and then

stopped still as stone, for across the yellow patch of the window, but on the same side of the road as himself, the figure of a man passed, doubled-up conspirator wise—a long lanky man with a lean neck—and Peter could have hooted with joy. It was the Rev. Septimus Tringle.

From the shadow of the barn Peter watched him take up a position by a wall, and presently there was another faint click, and again a large flying beetle seemed to soar away into the distance. It was a piece of luck Peter had not counted on, and he hastened to take advantage of it. With the utmost caution, testing every footstep before resting his weight on it, he moved towards the dimly visible figure against the wall, ready at any instant to fire if the other should discover his presence. When less than a dozen yards separated them he spoke.

"Don't move or turn round, please, Mr. Tringle: I'll shoot if you do," he said suavely.

The figure did not move. Peter took a couple of steps forward.

"Drop the pistol and put up your hands," he went on in a pleasant voice, then adding, with a sudden change of tone, "And quick, too, or, by God, I'll drill you where you stand!"

There was no reluctance on Mr. Tringle's part to obey both orders. Peter picked up the fallen pistol—a long-barrelled affair with a thick chamber.

"Now march," he said. "And if you play any tricks with me I'll kill you. Understand?"

"I understand—blast you!" muttered the other between set teeth.

"Tut-tut, Mr. Tringle—a clergyman, too!"

"You can cut that out," snarled the captive. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Peter quietly, after a pause.

From his captive's silence it was evident that he could.

"You tried to kill me with those snakes—and failed," Peter went on, a note of gravity creeping into his voice. "You tried to drown me in the mud—and failed. And just now you tried to kill me again—and once more you failed. Is there any reason why I shouldn't try to kill you?"

The other was silent, and Peter thought he heard his teeth give an involuntary chatter.

"I'm sorry to have to kill you—I'm really a soft-hearted person and hate killing anything—but I'm afraid there's no alternative. And you must admit I'm only meting out a fate you intended for me. It was a pity you didn't know the mud was only a few inches deep in that particular spot, because I shall know what spot to avoid. Please move along—and remember I have both pistols."

"You're going to murder me?"

"Of course I am. What else do you suppose?" asked Peter simply.

It was a fit setting for an act of violence, as they crossed the marshy fields towards the river. Far away the lights of Seabridge twinkled under a darkling sky in which traces of the past day still lingered, though it was long after sunset. For miles in front and on either hand there was no human habitation in sight, and the sense of desolation was deepened by the plaintive murmur of the sea.

Suddenly the man in front stopped, and there was just sufficient light for Peter to see that his face was working.

"You—you can't kill me like this," he faltered. "I know when I'm beaten—I've failed and I'm ready to pay the penalty. Hand me over to the police—shoot me if you like—I can bear even that—but not—" he gulped—"not in the mud."

"Did you think of that when you threw me in?" asked Peter coldly.

"I didn't—I admit I didn't. But you can't throw me in there—you can't—it's too horrible. I'll plead with you on my knees if you like—"

Peter raised one pistol. "Get on!" he said in a harsh voice. The journey was resumed.

At length the river bank was reached. It was wider here than the place where Peter had nearly met his end, though the mud-banks were if anything steeper. Peter threw his captive's pistol into the mud. It sank from sight immediately.

"Deep here, eh?" said Peter.

The other looked down at the slow-moving river at the bottom and shuddered. "You're not going to throw me in there?" he cried hoarsely.

"I'm going to give you what you would never dream of giving me—a fighting chance," was the reply. "You and I are going to have a man-to-man, good old-fashioned scrap with our bare hands—and the loser is going in the mud. Can you think of anything fairer than that?"

"Fairer?" Hope had brought a little manliness back into the other's voice. "And you armed?"

"On the contrary, we fight on equal terms. And to prove it I will lay my pistol on the ground. All I ask is your word of honour not to touch it."

"Very well. I give it."

Peter placed the revolver on the ground and stepped back two paces. Instantly, with a wild laugh, the other stooped and picked it up.

"You fool! You utter idiot!" he cried. "Did you think for a moment you were going to get the best of me! My God, I'll give you something for the fright you've given me! It's you that's going into the mud—but this time I'll make certain you're dead before you go in."

Peter did not reply. He stood still, his attitude the image of dejection.

"Nothing to say, eh?" snarled the other, taking a few steps back, as if fearing Peter was on the point of making a despairing attack. "You were talkative enough when you had the upper hand. Do you know that I'm going to kill you—you swine!—now?"

"Yes." Peter's voice was sad. "I was afraid you'd try that. That's the reason I took the cartridges out first."

Quickly the other raised the pistol and fired. There was a succession of clicks. Peter laughed shortly.

"I rather think it's you for the mud after all," he said, and the next instant he had closed with his enemy. For a short time the man fought desperately, kicking and scratching like a wild-cat; but Peter had twice his strength, and in less than two minutes had his adversary under his knee.

He rose to his feet, breathing quickly. "Get up," he said.

It had become considerably darker in the last five minutes. Peter saw that the other was lying still in a peculiar attitude, close to the bank of the river.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

A groan was the reply. It seemed to Peter that the man was trying to do something to his leg. He took a step forward, and was about to bend over him, when the man leaped to his feet with great rapidity, holding something in his hand, and without pausing aimed a sweeping blow at Peter's head.

Peter ducked just in time to avoid the blow, and then, a flame of anger rising in him at this second act of treachery, he swiftly dropped on one knee and collared the man's legs, at the same time giving a tremendous heave that threw him clean over his shoulder. He heard the man give a kind of sob, and then scrambled to his feet, only to realize that he was standing on the very brink of the steep bank of the river. He looked round for his adversary—and from below him there came a scream.

"Help!—I'm sinking—oh, quick!" The voice rose to a shriek again.

"Hold on!—I'm coming," cried Peter. "Spread your coat out—"

He plunged down the slope, but in a moment he had sunk to his knees. Ten feet away a black mass was writhing and struggling. Peter tried to take another step forward, tearing off his coat as he did so, but the mud gripped his legs like glue.

"Try and catch my coat," he yelled, making frantic casts down the slope, but to no purpose—the coat fell short by a yard. Scream after scream rent the air;

a man was dying the most horrible of deaths not four yards from him, and he was powerless to save him.

And then, suddenly, silence fell—a silence broken only by the gentle rippling of the river at the foot of the slope, and the sighing of the light summer wind as it passed over the desolate flats.

## CHAPTER IX

### ON THE ISLAND

### (i)

THE steamer from Guernsey had just moored between the two stone piers that enclose the harbour at Sark. Most of the passengers had crossed the gangway and were already bargaining with the drivers of horse-drawn vehicles anxious to take them for a trip round the island, when a man who had been standing in the stern, apparently lost in meditation upon the scene before him, came abruptly to the realization of his position and made for the gangway with some haste.

He was a long, lean, untidy-looking man, with a bent back and a habit of carrying his head out-thrust like an inquisitive hen, which, combined with his large glasses, gave him the appearance of being short-sighted. Obviously a man of intellect, there was that about him that made one think immediately of libraries and the silence of reading-rooms. In years he might have been anything between forty and sixty, and it was evident that like a good many literary men he was inclined to be fussy over trifles, for he could

not at first find his ticket, and showed signs of weak petulance at having to search his pocket for it.

A young American who stood on the quay smiled a little at the scene. He had had a conversation with the old boy—as he mentally called the man with the glasses —on the journey across, and had been rather amused by his company. The old fellow's name was Juckes, he had discovered, and he was engaged on writing a history of the Channel Islands. The American had set him down as a "character," and had looked forward to seeing more of him, since it appeared they were staying at the same hotel. It is possible that he would have betrayed even greater interest had he known that a few weeks previously Mr. Juckes had been a prosaic garage-proprietor on the Brighton Road, and that there was at the present moment a small automatic pistol reposing in a canvas holster strapped under one armpit.

Arrived on the quay, Mr. Juckes was looking round for a conveyance to take him to his hotel when he became aware of the American standing beside him.

"Pretty little spot," said the American.

"Yes, indeed—most delightful," rejoined Mr. Juckes, surveying the scene through his spectacles. "One of those rare backwaters of the world which Progress and the rush of modern life seem happily to have passed completely by."

The American smiled appreciatively.

"Stopping long here, Mr. Juckes?" he asked.

"Possibly—it depends upon how long it will take me to complete my work," was the vague reply.

"Why, sure," said the American. "I'm stopping a

week if I can stick it. Maybe we'll be seeing something of each other."

"Quite—quite," said Mr. Juckes absent-mindedly. "Oh, certainly."

His tone was not particularly enthusiastic, for though he liked the look of the American, the last thing he wanted was company. The other, however, was far from thin-skinned, and continued to babble cheerfully, and for very courtesy's sake Mr. Juckes had to appear to show some interest in his remarks. It was natural that he should incline to look upon the American with suspicion—indeed, since his experience of the Rev. Mr. Tringle there were few people whom he had not so regarded—yet he could have sworn that here, for once, was someone who was not involved in the web of mystery in which he had been caught. The American —his name was Lamont—was a slim young man with an open, sunburnt countenance and clear grey eyes that were seldom without a glint of amusement, and it occurred to Mr. Juckes that under certain circumstances he might prove a useful ally. He looked the kind of man who could be trusted to give a good account of himself in an emergency.

An hour later, having partaken of a lobster lunch with rather more appetite than one would have expected of a man of his years, Mr. Juckes sallied forth to explore. His plans were of the vaguest. He had, however, ascertained before leaving England that the house which Sir Mortimer Drude had once owned was called "St. Cloud," the present occupiers being a family named Reddieson. It appeared that Dr. Reddieson was a Scotsman who had lived a good deal

abroad, and was said to have at one time practised in Paris; moreover, he was a widower who lived with an unmarried daughter. All of which was satisfactory enough so far as it went; the omissions in the dossier Mr. Juckes proposed to supply himself. In his character of earnest student of the habits and customs of the islands, he thought, the task would not prove a difficult one.

It was a simple matter to find the house. It stood alone in a hollow about a furlong from the cliffs, a substantial building faced with stone, beset on all sides except one by a grove of short trees, and it had a considerable front garden running down to the lane by which it was approached. Guide-book in hand, Mr. Juckes scrutinized the place from the lane. There appeared to be no one about. He was considering various pretexts for gaining an entrance, when a sentence in the guide-book caught his eye—"There is only one dolmen on Sark—" and it gave him an idea.

Pushing open the gate he approached the house and rang the front-door bell.

He was prepared for surprises; he was prepared to be faced by Sir Mortimer Drude himself; yet it needed all his self-control to preserve his countenance when the door opened and revealed none other than the ex-pugilist, Copping by name, whom he had last seen in Sir Mortimer's laboratory at Okewood Hall. And the nervousness in his voice, when he spoke, was not all simulated.

"I am so sorry to trouble you," he began apologetically, "but I wonder if you would be good enough to tell me whereabouts in this neighbourhood the dolmen is?"

The bruiser shook a puzzled head. "Don't know any place of that name here, sir."

"It isn't a place, it's—ah—a stone, a kind of cromlech," explained Mr. Juckes, who had only the vaguest notions about the subject himself. "Perhaps Dr. Reddieson . . . if it isn't too much trouble. . . ."

The pug eyed his interlocutor suspiciously. Strangers were not encouraged at "St. Cloud;" yet this stranger looked harmless enough. And despite the company he kept there were germs of kindness beneath Copping's rough exterior.

"I'll just inquire if you'll wait 'arf a minute," he said. And presently, for the third time in his life, Mr. Juckes was face to face with Sir Mortimer Drude.

"You wish to see me?" inquired the scientist, his pale eyes searching Mr. Juckes'. And Mr. Juckes, conscious of an uncomfortable feeling that few secrets were hidden from that keen gaze, began to wonder if he had been wise in calling.

"I really shouldn't have troubled you, Dr. Reddieson —it is Dr. Reddieson, is it not?—the matter is only trifling . . . I made sure your servant would know . . . I didn't dream—"

The other cut short his apologies. "What is it you want to know?" he demanded.

Mr. Juckes managed to force a smile. "Well, you see, Doctor, I am writing a history of these islands, and as I am naturally interested in megalithic remains I am anxious to examine any dolmens on the island. I understand—"

"The only dolmen on Sark is nearly half a mile away," the other interrupted. "Anyone will tell you

where it is; why do you bother me? I really cannot allow my work to be interrupted by such trifles, and I wish you good afternoon, sir."

The front door was open, Dr. Reddieson's marble eyes were fixed on his with the old inscrutable expression, and there was nothing to be gained by staying longer. He had found out one of the things he had come to Sark to discover; the rest could wait. For the present it was enough to know that Dr. Reddieson and Sir Mortimer Drude were one and the same person.

"Thank you so much—I am so sorry to be a nuisance!" he said effusively. "Good afternoon."

He raised his hat with a clumsy gesture, and Dr. Reddieson bowed coldly in reply. As soon as the door closed, however, the doctor's expression altered. With a grim frown he summoned Copping.

"Send Arthur to me at once," he ordered.

Almost immediately a little man with a white face appeared.

"Follow that man who has just been here," said Dr. Reddieson. "Find out where he's staying, when he arrived, and everything you can about him."

An hour later Mr. Juckes entered the little post-office in the centre of the island. Was it possible to send a telegram? he inquired. Certainly he could; the post-office was open until seven. That was most satisfactory, but would a wire dispatched that afternoon reach England before night-time? The postmaster was on the point of replying when the eccentric visitor suddenly changed his mind, apparently for no reason at all, and announced that he would send a picture postcard instead.

The postmaster saw no connection between this trivial circumstance and the fact that a little man entered the post-office at that moment and purchased some stamps. But Mr. Juckes had noted the man before he crossed the threshold, and behold! It was the little fellow he had held up at the point of the revolver that night at Okewood Hall, and compelled to lead him to the laboratory door. And something in his manner—a certain indifference to his own presence which was just the least bit too studied to be natural—suggested it was not mere coincidence that was responsible for his being there at that particular moment.

So Dr. Reddieson was curious to know his movements, was he? Perhaps it was his pleasant habit to have every visitor who stayed on the island shadowed, until he was satisfied of their harmlessness; perhaps not. In any case it showed that the doctor was fully aware of the danger of his own position. Well, if the little man had been sent to spy on him Mr. Juckes did not worry; he had perfect confidence in the efficiency of his disguise. The telegram could wait. Meanwhile, the views of Sark displayed in the post-office were exceptionally interesting, and he was in no hurry.

Nor, so it appeared, was the little man, for he, too, appeared to be absorbed in the views. In fact, it is doubtful if those picture post-cards had ever before attracted so much interest. Minutes passed, and still the scrutiny went on; and there is no knowing how long it would have continued had not a most awkward incident occurred—a most unfortunate business altogether.

How it happened was not quite clear, but it seemed that just as the short-sighted Mr. Juckes—always a singularly clumsy individual—was leaning sideways in an endeavour to peer at a picture-postcard he could not properly see, his foot slipped and he overbalanced. That, in order to save himself, he should clutch frantically at the little man, who chanced to be standing a few feet away, was natural but disastrous, for not only did he fail to regain his balance but he brought down the little man with him—and unfortunately the little man was underneath.

Nothing could have exceeded Mr. Juckes' confusion as he helped the little man to his feet, neighing his apologies with the utmost concern; and nothing could have exceeded the little man's indignation. Clearly he thought it had been done on purpose.

"Why don't you look what yer doing, you great big clumsy owl?" he cried. "Ain't the 'ole world big enough without comin' and throwin' yer great 'ulkin' weight about in 'ere?"

"I assure you, really, I—I—really, I'm most upset," stammered Mr. Juckes. "I can't think how it happened—most distressing for you, I'm sure. I do hope you're not hurt.

"Hurt!" repeated the other angrily. "If I'd broken me leg it would 'ave been your fault! Ruddy old fool!"

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Juckes frowning. "An accident is an accident. I have apologized, and between gentlemen that usually closes the matter. There is no occasion for bad language."

"Oh, ain't there, Mr. Particular! Well, then—"

Mr. Juckes turned his back.

For a moment it looked as if the little man was about to commit a violent assault on his person. Then, apparently thinking better of it, he shouted one more objurgation, and left the shop muttering. Over his shoulder Mr. Juckes watched him go with a distasteful expression.

"A vulgar fellow, that," he remarked. "Who is he?"

"One of the servants from 'St. Cloud,' I believe," the postmaster replied.

"A singularly unpleasant character, I should imagine," said Mr. Juckes. "Now what was I about to do when he came in? Ah, yes, a telegram—I was on the point of sending a telegram, was I not? You are quite sure it will reach England to-night if I send it now?"

(ii)

As he left the post-office Peter chuckled grimly to himself. By purposely irritating the man whom he was convinced Sir Mortimer had sent to spy upon him, he had made him momentarily forget his purpose and had then been enabled to dispatch his wire in secret. True, there was nothing in the telegram to arouse suspicions in the most vigilant breast—it merely requested the recipient to forward on certain articles of clothing, his camera, and one or two books on geology—but he preferred Sir Mortimer to remain in ignorance of the fact that he had sent a wire at all. Of course, the little man would report to his master the whole scene in the post-office, but whether he

thought him merely an eccentric old fool or something deeper did not greatly matter. His disguise, which was the work of a certain specialist in make-up to whom Venning had sent him, he defied anyone to pierce. Sir Mortimer might suspect what he liked, but he could prove nothing, if he searched every article of clothing he possessed.

While he had tea at a cottage near the Colinette he considered his next step. He believed that he had discovered the headquarters of the gang for whom the police of three continents were searching. At first sight it looked as if all that remained to be done was to summon efficient help from Guernsey and, with the assistance of the Sark authorities, put the whole household under arrest. There was, however, a serious objection to this plan. Sir Mortimer, it was clear, was fully on his guard, and probably had agents at Guernsey and Jersey who would immediately inform him of any display of official force that threatened his safety. For such an emergency he was bound to be amply prepared. No man would play with fire as he had done without having taken measures to ensure his own safety in case of discovery. Calling in the police to arrest him as if he were an ordinary criminal would be a proceeding foredoomed to failure, Peter was convinced. At the merest hint of danger the bird would fly—fly in the literal sense, perhaps.

Sir Mortimer Drude had chosen his hiding-place well. Situated within an hour's flying distance of France and England it was ideally situated for sudden departure. Peter remembered Mr. Bridgewater telling him how the scientist had often disappeared for months at

a time; here was the explanation. He had probably been leading a double life for years. And who, in such an out-of-the-way place, would ever think of identifying the retired Scotch doctor with the famous Sir Mortimer Drude? There was always the chance of recognition, of course, but it was so remote that it safely could be ignored.

How far his niece was implicated in the deception could only be guessed. Sir Mortimer had spoken of her being imprisoned on an island, presumably because of the part she had played in saving Peter's life. It was hardly likely he would go so far as to confine her to one of the lesser islands, few of which were habitable; everything pointed to her being at "St. Cloud". If this was so he vowed that he would find means to see that she was free before the net finally closed around her uncle and his accomplices. It would be a poor way of showing his gratitude to allow her to be involved in the round-up he had every intention of engineering.

Later in the day he found the opportunity to ask the manager of his hotel if he knew anything of the Reddiesons. It appeared that the doctor moved abroad little, rumor having it that he was devoted to scientific research, an occupation which allowed small time for leisure.

"To tell you the truth I haven't seen him for months," the manager confessed, "nor Miss Reddieson either, poor thing. They are not a sociable family."

"Why 'poor thing'?" demanded Peter. "Is she an invalid?"

The manager nodded and touched his forehead.

"Mental," he said. "At least, that's what I'm told. She never leaves the house now. Such a nice girl she was, too."

"To tell you the truth, I rather formed the impression that Dr. Reddieson himself was somewhat—er—peculiar," Peter remarked. "He was certainly strangely abrupt in his manner."

"He would be if you were a stranger to him. I happen to know he detests strangers. There was rather an unpleasant incident a few weeks ago. A number of young fellows staying on the island started some horse-play and rang the bell at 'St. Cloud' and pretended they were pierrots. It seems the butler has been something of a boxer in his time, and he laid out three of them on the lawn. The Seigneur was very angry, I can tell you. By the way, do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Juckes?"

"When I see a ghost I will believe in it," replied that gentleman.

"I wondered, because we have a pet ghost on the island. Talking of 'St. Cloud' reminded me of it, for it was near there it was last seen. I think you'll admit it takes an original form. How would you like to see a ghostly motor-boat?"

"A motor-boat? Dear me! I should most certainly like to see it."

"Perhaps you will," said the manager, laughing. "It's been seen three times up to date, and always at night. One of the fishermen, Tom Damon, was the last. He declared it headed straight for the cliffs at full speed and vanished into the solid rock."

"Very extraordinary," said Mr. Juckes thought-

fully. "And where do you say this—er—manifestation occurred?"

"Just under the cliffs by 'St. Cloud'—according to Tom Damon. The remarkable part about it is that he's a steady old fellow, a most reliable man as a rule, and a good Wesleyan."

"You interest me profoundly," said Mr. Juckes (which was no more than the truth). "In a humble way I have myself been something of an inquirer into the mysteries of the unseen world, and the more I learn the more I am amazed at the vastness of our ignorance. But I confess that hitherto I have never yet met with a phantom motor-boat."

"You don't believe in the nonsense?" the manager asked incredulously.

"The man Damon may be the victim of an hallucination, of course," admitted Mr. Juckes with suitable gravity, "yet do you know, I incline to the view that it was one of those cases of a photoplasmic materialization of the electra, corresponding to what is known in the poltergeist world as pre-actuality of experience. I confess I should like to view the scene of the manifestation."

"If you're interested in such things I've no doubt one of the fishermen would take you round," said the manager, obviously rather impressed. "I should like to know how you get on."

Peter promised that he would let him know. Secretly he was delighted with the story to which he had just listened; for not only did it suggest possibilities of discovery in connection with Sir Mortimer Drude's method of leaving and arriving at the island, but it

also gave him an excellent excuse for nocturnal rambling —a pastime in which he hoped to indulge to a considerable extent in the near future. If he was discovered prowling about the island in the small hours he could always say he was ghost-hunting—of course in suitably impressive language. It occurred to him it might be useful to swot up some book on spiritualism, if the hotel library ran to such a subject, and a fortunate search revealing an old copy of "The Survival of Man", by Sir Oliver Lodge, he retired with it to his room.

(iii)

Until that evening Peter had always been a hearty supporter of Daylight Saving, but as he sat in his bedroom waiting for darkness to fall he appreciated the fact that it had certain disadvantages, especially from the point of view of the burgling classes. Half-past ten went by and still the faint remnant of daylight lingered; it was not until a clock downstairs struck eleven that he decided it was dark enough to commence operations.

Quite by chance he had been put in a room that overlooked a kind of yard, occupied in the daytime by ducks and fowls, and underneath his window was a long, gently-sloping wooden roof that made his descent to the ground child's play. There was fortunately no dog, and he melted into the shadow beyond the low stone wall without causing a sound. A certain risk of being made to look rather foolish if he was discovered lay in this method of leaving the hotel; but the alternative, which was to spin some yarn of his being

addicted to walking about at night, and get the staff to let him have a latch-key, he had dismissed. News travels quickly on an island, and if it came to the ears of Dr. Reddieson that one of the hotel guests was in the habit of walking abroad during the night hours, he would probably draw his own conclusions and be rendered doubly on his guard.

Through the low fringe of trees surrounding the hotel Peter slipped and gained the roadway. The moon was occasionally visible through the sailing clouds, and whenever it shone clear he stopped still until it was obscured again. His rubbered feet made no noise as he drew near to that part of the island where Dr. Reddieson lived. He was aware of a certain tenseness in his mind, a feeling rather akin to the nervousness he had experienced during the solitary occasion on which he had appeared for his county at cricket, when he was waiting with his pads on to go in and bat. Peter was really no more than a good second-class cricketer, and his one venture in the ranks of the first class had not been crowned with success, but he well remembered the state of his feelings as he had watched the trundling of the fast bowler whom he was presently to face. And were not the circumstances now very similar?—for here was he, an amateur burglar, about, in the vernacular, to crack his first crib, with the certain knowledge that a highly-skilled professional in the world of crime was only waiting for the opportunity to bowl out such as himself neck and crop. There was a queer comfort in the weight of his automatic as he thought with what glee Dr. Reddieson would gloat over him if he was captured and his real

identity discovered. For though, thanks to dye, electric treatment and the judicious use of a paraffin wax, he bore no resemblance facially to that importunate person, Mr. Peter Brown, late Major in the R.A.F., his artificial eye and the scar beneath it would infallibly give him away once his spectacles were removed.

Presently he reached the lane that led to "St. Cloud". Here he climbed a stone wall on the side opposite to the house, and picked his way through the scattered trees that grew there until he reached a position commanding the building. He had prospected the place by daylight, and it afforded an excellent view.

The house was in darkness save for two windows, one on the ground floor and one on the next story, but in each case the blinds were drawn. For half an hour nothing happened. Once, indeed, a shadow passed across the blind of the lower room, but that was all. Then at last the light in the top window went out; there was the rattle of a Venetian blind being raised and the window was opened from the bottom. Peter raised the field-glasses he had brought with him. After a few minutes' waiting the moon slid from behind a cloud and shone full on the window; and with a thrill Peter focussed a white figure that leaned out with arms resting on the sill. One of the women servants, perhaps, he thought. And then the figure made a little movement of the head, entirely characteristic and quite unmistakable, and Peter knew he was looking at the girl who had scarcely ever been out of his thoughts since that memorable night at Okewood Hall.

Had he dared he would have tried to attract her attention, but the risk was too great. Seeing an elderly

man in the garden at that hour she might easily rouse the household before he could make himself known. And what grounds had he for supposing that she would not immediately rouse the household even if she did know who he was? He had to admit there were none; like a faithful dog she might still be loyal to the hand that ill-used her.

But he determined now to run one risk and try to see who was in the lower room! and when, five minutes later, the girl gave an audible sigh and withdrew from the window, he crossed the lane and, pushing open the gate, sought cover in some bushes. Then, dodging silently from bush to bush, he approached the window. It, too, had a Venetian blind, with the slats sloping upwards from the outside, and by peeping through the lowest he had a clear view of the upper three-quarters of the room.

At a table in the centre sat Sir Mortimer Drude, his white head bent over a microscope. A pad on which he appeared to be making notes lay beside him, while the table was loaded with books and papers. There was another person in the room, a good-looking man who wore a monocle, and had the clean-shaven, incisive features of an English barrister. He was reading a newspaper, and, as he moved his head, with a shock of amazement Peter recognized him. There were indeed few private members of the House of Commons whose faces were so familiar to the world as Newsome Eversdale, the well known die-hard and leader of the group of reactionaries who had been dubbed "The Last Gaspers" by an irresponsible Labour member.

Wondering what in the name of sanity a man like

Eversdale could have in common with Sir Mortimer, the watcher was about to withdraw to the safety of the bushes until such time as the members of the household should retire, when the scientist leaned back in his chair and spoke.

"A harmless ass, my dear Newsome, that's all—I had inquiries made about him at his hotel. A fool, and what is more a writing fool, but dangerous, no. His inquiry was a coincidence, nothing more. One of those ineffable persons, Newsome, who go about the world collecting innumerable data about the trival . . . a counter of dead leaves—pah! I have no use for such twaddlers. Let us talk of something else. Tell me again what Zorloff said."

"What part?" the other replied, looking lazily over the top of his newspaper, and Peter received his second shock, for the voice of Mr. Newsome Eversdale was the voice he had heard at midnight on the sands near Seabridge.

"About the Plymouth arrangements. You know I dislike having them altered," said Sir Mortimer testily.

"I'm afraid there's no alternative, my dear fellow," drawled Eversdale. "I shouldn't worry, the other places can easily be brought into line."

He yawned, while Peter tried to readjust his ideas to this new discovery. Newsome Eversdale, M. P., the mysterious individual whom Colonel Venning had described as the most dangerous man alive—the thing was incredible. Yet it was undoubtedly his voice that he had heard on the night of the experiment on Whale Head. He remembered now that it had been

vaguely familiar to him at the time, for he had once heard Eversdale address a meeting at Reading.

"What was the matter with the *Queen Anne* that she was delayed at Malta?" the scientist demanded presently.

"Don't ask me, my dear chap, I know nothing about a ship's technicalities," returned the M.P. with another yawn. "Something about the turbines, so I understood. What about bed, Mortimer? I'm as tired as a tramp."

"Wait a moment, I want to get this clear, Newsome. Are you certain there is no doubt about Toulon, Cherbourg, Portsmouth, Spezia and the rest falling into line? Remember that unless we act simultaneously we may as well not act at all."

Newsome Eversdale laid down his newspaper and allowed his monocle to fall.

"It won't pay them not to," he said dryly. "I don't allow my orders to be broken lightly, Mortimer. It's a nuisance having to alter all the dispositions in order to suit Devonport as it is. Kreller I'm sure about; he's in charge at Spezia and won't fail. Pagleiro is safe enough at Toulon; so is Zorloff, who's looking after Cherbourg. Lammiter can be relied on to see after things at Chatham, and Marris won't bungle Portsmouth so long as the little devil gets sufficient reward, curse him. What day do you expect Pagleiro and Kreller to arrive?"

"Horstman's fetching them to-morrow night from the usual spot, weather permitting," was the reply, as the scientist lit a cigarette. For a while he smoked in silence; and then he added: "Newsome, this

business is telling on me. I shall be glad when it's over and done with. I feel what you younger people call 'being on edge'."

"Nerves, my dear Mortimer," returned the other, leaning back and putting his hands behind his head. "I feel the effects of it myself. I assure you that when I was addressing that meeting up in Yorkshire last night I was more than once conscious of an overwhelming desire to yell the truth at the fools. I tell you I had to keep a firm grip of myself—especially when old Wiggins with his red face and white whiskers began referring to me as a pillar of the Empire. I was afraid I'd be lulled into complacency, and get caught off my guard. Curiously gullible crowd, the English. I should never have had the pull I have now if I'd toured the country on the red-flag racket. As it is I dine with Duchesses and Cabinet Ministers, and the working-man, who secretly loves blue blood as much as any Yank, whatever his political views may be, looks upon me as a hard-hitting, plain-spoken, downright John Bull sort of man he thinks he can understand. Heavens, if he only knew!"

"Let's hope they'll never find out, for your sake."

Eversdale shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I daresay they will one of these days. Politics is the easiest game in the world for a man to get into who wants notoriety, and it's about the most difficult to stop in if he's a humbug. I say the public are gullible, and so they are; but they have a most unpleasant knack of sorting the wheat from the chaff in the long run. Old Lincoln was just about right—'you can't fool all the people all the time'. That's why one of these days you'll

find Mr. Newsome Eversdale, M. P., applying for the stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds lest worse befall. As it is I'm already suspected in one or two places."

"Suspected?" The scientist raised his eyebrows. "By the public?"

"By one or two people who count."

"Indeed! And by whom, pray?"

"That fellow Tremayne of the Foreign Office for one; Cartwright, the secret-service man for another. Oh, I'm not imagining things, my dear Mortimer; I'm the least fanciful man alive. It's nothing more than a suspicion in each case, but I've seen them once or twice in unexpected places where there's no sound reason for their being there, and it's set me thinking."

"Coincidence," suggested Sir Mortimer.

"Possibly. I've no proof, of course. If I had I rather think it would not be long before there would be a couple of vacancies in the permanent staff of the Foreign Office. Two regrettable accidents, say, something on the lines of that unfortunate business of Geoffrey Hangerson. You remember— that cricketer chap who stole those papers of yours."

"I'm not likely to forget. It was recovering those papers that led indirectly to the trouble at Okewood Hall," said Sir Mortimer grimly.

Eversdale nodded. "You mean that man Brown. I'd forgotten he was mixed up with the Cornish business, but curiously enough I was just going to mention him. He's another of the men I'm afraid of."

"Because I was unwise enough to let him watch the experiment with my rays?"

"Because he heard my voice that same night,"

corrected Eversdale. "If that fool Daniels hadn't bungled it wouldn't have mattered, but as it is he's the one man outside ourselves who knows me for what I am, if he happened to recognize my voice. I only pray and hope he's dead."

"A pious wish in which I won't join you, my friend," observed Sir Mortimer with the old singular smile. "Not that I intend wasting my nervous force on anything so weak as thought of revenge; but death in itself is such a slight thing I would hate to think of Peter Brown passing the border-line without having first settled his final account with me—a fairly large account, you will admit."

"Mortimer, you are a sentimentalist," rejoined the other with some contempt. "What the devil does it matter who kills the man so long as he dies?"

"That," said the scientist, "is purely a matter of opinion." And he once more bent his head over the microscope.

Peter had heard enough. What devilry underlay the reference to the great battle-cruiser *Queen Anne*, and the naval bases of the three strongest Powers in Europe, he could only dimly guess, but that it was devilry he had no doubt for a moment. His original intention of entering the house and trying to get in touch with the girl held prisoner there he put aside at once. Desirable as he felt it was to give her the opportunity of escaping before the net closed round Sir Mortimer and his companions, the main issue had grown too important to be jeopardized by such an attempt.

To-morrow night!—that was the time arranged for

what had every appearance of being a final meeting of the gang pending the mysterious operations which Eversdale and Sir Mortimer had just been discussing. What an opportunity, if he could only make proper use of it! As he slipped away from the house and retraced his steps to the hotel he considered ways and means. The thing could be done easily enough; a wire would bring a score of men from England in a few hours. The difficulty lay in getting them to Sark without the gang's knowledge—seaplanes were such noisy things, and the sudden appearance of a squadron at the island would put Sir Mortimer on his guard at once. Then he had a brain-wave—Lamont, the American! He would come in useful after all.

Slipping into the hotel by the way he had left, he made his way to the American's room and tapped softly.

Five minutes later a tight-lipped young man was sitting on the edge of his bed, listening with rapt attention to an elderly spectacled gentleman of eccentric appearance, who spoke rapidly and earnestly in a low voice.

"Will you do it?" asked the eccentric-looking gentleman anxiously, a little later.

"Sure thing," said Mr. Lamont with shining eyes. "Count me in every time. Why, if you hadn't put me wise about this I'd never have forgiven you. I've spent half my young life looking for a real hundred-per-cent crook scenario I could sell to Hollywood, and here's the thing kind of sitting up and begging for notice right in front of my face. I reckon Doug. Fairbanks'll have to open his eyes some when he sees me coming."

## CHAPTER X

### A NEW USE FOR A DOLMEN

### (i)

THE following morning Peter and Lamont rose early and went down to the harbour. To avoid comment they carried bathing towels and costumes, but they did not bathe. Their business was with the fishermen who were already pottering about their boats, with whom they entered into earnest conversation. The upshot was that presently the American was conveyed Guernsey-wards in a motor-boat, leaving Peter talking to an elderly seaman with a grey beard. This man, whose name was Tom Damon, had the slow manner and perfect courtesy of the Sark native. He readily agreed to take Peter round the island in a rowing-boat in order to explore those caves which could only be reached by water; moreover it appeared that the tide would be at the right state that very morning, but it would be better to start from Havre Gosselin, the anchorage on the other side of the island.

Ten o'clock, accordingly, saw Peter descending the ladder that leads down to the water's edge at Havre Gosselin. He spent an interesting morning. The sea was calm, and Mr. Damon rowed him into caves which would have delighted the soul of a zoologist, and even pleased Peter, whose ignorance of the subject was vast, by the splendour and variety of plant and animal life displayed on the walls.

And presently they made their way under the cliff near "St. Cloud", where, as Peter expected, Mr. Damon began to relate the story of the mysterious motor-boat. At first he spoke with some diffidence, probably for fear of ridicule; but as his passenger listened with a perfectly serious face he soon expanded with that wealth of detail beloved by fishermen the world over. The story he told was practically identical with the manager's, and encouraged by Peter he even went so far as to point out the exact spot in the rocks where the alleged boat had disappeared. When Peter suggested that they should go nearer, Mr. Damon was nothing loth.

"Pretty deep here," Peter remarked, as the fisherman stopped rowing, and the boat rocked gently within a short distance of the high wall of the cliff.

"'Tis deep, sir," said Mr. Damon, with a shake of his grey head. "Deeper than anyone knows."

Peter glanced up at the cliffs. "Curious formation those rocks have. You might easily imagine some giant had been amusing himself by piling those great blocks on top of each other as a foundation for the whole cliff."

"Granite, sir—solid granite," said the fisherman. "Though I did once take a gentleman round who called them by another name. What was it now?"

"And it was here you say you saw the boat making for?" Peter asked.

"It was, sir. Making straight for't sure as I'm talking to you now. 'Twas a bigger motor-boat than any we have here, too. More like what they call a motor launch, I reckon. There was a bit o' moon

showing, and I caught sight of her once again when I was in me own boat with Peter Masson. Heading right for shore, she were, with not a light showing aboard of her. When I see the way she was going I shouted loud as I could to stop her, but 'twas no use. Like a dart she went, straight at the cliff—and vanished clean away."

"What an extraordinary thing. Smashed to pieces, I suppose, on the rocks?"

"No, sir she didn't smash up, for Peter and me rowed there fast as we could, and there wasn't sign nor sound of her, not of boat nor man. Swallowed up she was, like a miracle."

"Do you think she went down?" asked Peter.

"What else was I to think, sir? She must have sunk in a second, crew and all. And as I say, 'tis so deep hereabouts no one would ever find her."

"It's curious there was nothing, though; no caps or seat-cushions or anything like that?"

"'Tis curious, you're right, sir; so curious that half the folk won't believe me and try to make out as I seen a ghost. Not but what there's ghosts on Sark, but who ever heard of a motor-boat being one?" He gave a deep rumbling laugh, and added: "Besides, there's John Duboy and Tom Pegane seen it before me; ghosts don't appear to several like that—not in Sark."

Peter returned to the hotel for lunch well pleased with his morning's work, and with an appetite that considerably astonished the waiter. Early in the afternoon he received a telephone call from Guernsey and spoke to Lamont, who informed him that he had been

in communication with England and all was well. Afterwards he sat in a deck-chair on the veranda with a book on his lap, but he made only a pretence of reading. He felt restless and unable to think clearly of anything save the task before him. Outwardly calm enough, his brain kept worrying over details, wondering if there was any contingency that he had omitted to provide for, any loophole of escape he had overlooked.

The main part of his plan was simple enough. Time did not permit of assistance arriving by boat, it must come by air; but the arrival of two or three seaplanes in the vicinity of Sark, or even at St. Peter's Port, which could be seen from Sark, would indubitably warn Sir Mortimer that something unusual was happening and rouse his suspicions. It was extremely unlikely that he had neglected to station someone at St. Peter's Port, the capital of Guernsey, with the idea of immediately informing him of any special movements on the part of the police. Peter had therefore instructed Lamont to direct the occupants of the seaplane to land in some secluded bay on the further side of Guernsey, and to make their way as secretly as possible, and by whatever means available, to Sark, where he had arranged a meeting-place. The house would then be surrounded, precautions taken to prevent the occupants escaping by any other exit, and then——

Peter was not quite certain what would happen then. The obvious thing to do was to walk in and arrest the whole gang, but somehow he did not think it would be accomplished quite so easily as that. There would, he calculated, be at least eight or nine

resolute men in the house, men utterly unscrupulous in the taking of human life, hardened by constant defiance of civilized law, and they would certainly not allow themselves to be captured without a fierce struggle. Peter had asked for twenty men, and even with that number the task would be a dangerous one. He recalled how, years ago, a few armed, desperate men had defended a London house for hours against a small army. For all he knew Sir Mortimer might be in possession of machine-guns, or even deadlier weapons. It was a situation demanding subtlety and cunning rather than daring and brute-force; yet for the life of him he could not at the moment see how it was to be brought to a successful conclusion without loss of valuable lives. And then there was the question of the girl. . . .

He rose and flung his book in the chair. Perhaps a sharp walk would clarify his thoughts; this sitting-still business was intolerable. His brain seemed absolutely barren of ideas. There *must* be some way of getting hold of the girl and saving her from the humiliation of being captured along with the rest. Duty and desire tugged fiercely at him from opposite directions. On the one hand, plain as fate, was his duty as a man to do his utmost to lay these outlaws of civilization by the heels; on the other was the cruel realization that this course must inevitably bring about the ruin of the woman who had saved his life. Moreover, any attempt to get into touch with her and help her to escape before the final arrest might quite easily imperil the success of the whole operation.

He was savagely filling a pipe when he became aware

of a figure approaching from the hall-door of the hotel, and he stiffened suddenly. It was Sir Mortimer Drude.

Smiling urbanely, the scientist approached him with outstretched arm.

"I hope you will forgive this intrusion, Mr. Juckes," he said pleasantly. "They told me I should find you here. I have really come to ask your forgiveness for what I fear was my unbearable rudeness yesterday."

"You are very kind, Dr. Reddieson," said Peter, "but I assure you I was not aware of——"

"Ah, but my dear sir, I was, though I greatly appreciate your generosity in pretending not to have noticed it. I was most unbearably discourteous, Mr. Juckes, and you must allow me to apologize. We old men are rather apt to get a little irritable at times, I'm afraid, and yesterday was one of my bad days. I trust you succeeded in finding the dolmen of which you were in search?"

"As a matter of fact I was reserving that pleasure for to-morrow," Peter had to confess.

"That makes my errand all the easier," the scientist said. "I was indeed hoping that such would be the case, for it allows me to offer to make some amends. May I suggest that you afford me the privilege of acting as your cicerone to the island? I gather that you yourself are not uninterested in the stone monuments of primitive ages, Mr. Juckes?"

"Only so far as it bears on my present work," Peter returned. "My interest is merely that of the man in the street, Doctor."

"Excellent, Mr. Juckes, excellent. You will the more readily be able to assimilate all I shall have to tell

you. In my youth the subject of alignments, menhirs and cromlechs formed one of my earliest studies, and though our one dolmen on Sark is hardly a Kit's Coty House, I have no doubt I shall succeed in interesting you in it, poor specimen as it is."

Peter's first inclination was to invent a strained ankle, and beg to be excused. But he foresaw that if Sir Mortimer had only visited him, as he surmised was the case, in order to satisfy himself fully that Mr. Juckes was no more than a harmless crank, a refusal to accompany him might reawake his suspicions. After all the scientist would not be likely to attempt any violence in broad daylight, whatever his suspicions were, for Sark was very far from being a desert island.

"I'll come with pleasure," he said. "I shall be glad of the chance to stretch my legs. Excuse me one moment."

Returning to his room he unbuckled the small canvas pistol holster under his left armpit, and transferred his automatic to his pocket. He was running no risks where Sir Mortimer was concerned.

The scientist was in an amiable and discoursive mood. As they walked together—Peter always with an eye to unexpected contingencies—he talked in a way which in happier circumstances would have delighted his companion. But Peter was weighed down by his knowledge of impending events. The face of Una Drude kept coming before his mind. Some picture which he had seen somewhere or other kept recurring to him: the gloomy picture of a court-scene, with the judge and all the paraphernalia of the law, and in the foreground a girl standing in the witness-box,

white-faced and scornful—and the girl had the features of that girl he had once met in a Devonshire lane, who had called herself "Jane Smith". There was contempt as well as scorn in her eyes, contempt for him, the man whose life she had saved, and who had repaid the obligation by bringing her to this ignominy.

It was conceivable that she herself would escape prison, but even so, what could she think of his conduct, save that it was hateful and despicable? What would be the use of pointing out that he had only done his duty, in face of the overwhelming fact that he had brought about the downfall of her uncle? The strange bond of attachment between her and Sir Mortimer probably still persisted, in spite of his treatment of her; women were made that way, he supposed. Whatever happened, so far as Peter could see, the very thought of the man whom she had once so pluckily rescued would be insupportable to her.

His thoughts travelled to the man beside him, now holding forth learnedly about monoliths, and his depression deepened. He had no ill-will at all against Sir Mortimer; his main feeling was one of regret that the destiny of a man of such tremendous intellectual capacity should be so warped. What was the cause, he wondered? Up to the end of the War he had been a responsible and highly-respected citizen. The shock of an air-raid, perhaps: such things were known sometimes to subvert men's moral balance, and if the cause was pathological, how could the man be blamed? Perhaps all crime, all sin, was pathological, and in the distant future a murderer, instead of being hanged, would undergo an operation. . . .

He came out of his reverie and forced himself to pay attention to the other's conversation, for they had left the roadway and were approaching a group of stones which had some appearance of having been put in their present formation by human hands. They stood in a field by themselves, a lonely monument of a past age, with a few bushes growing round the two flat slabs that lay flat on the ground.

"Curious how little we know about the people who erected them," observed the scientist. "We don't even know for certain what they were for, though the fact that the smooth surface of the stones is invariably turned inwards suggests they were intended to be used as vaults rather than altars."

"Stonehenge and Avebury were temples, I understand," remarked Peter, who felt he must make some intelligent comment.

"Precisely," Sir Mortimer agreed, "and both Stonehenge and Avebury were probably erected by a race considerably further along the path of human advancement than the builders of these relics. Nevertheless, these are not without their interest to the archæologist. Look at the marks on this stone here." He pointed with his stick.

"Marks?" said Peter, interested in spite of himself. "I don't see any."

"Here," said Sir Mortimer, tapping the stone. "They're not very plain, but they're quite decipherable, if you look."

Peter bent down, and then, arrested by some singular quality in his companion's voice, he turned

his head. But he was too late, for like a madman Sir Mortimer struck at him with his stick.

Half-stunned, Peter tried to reach his pistol, but before he could do so the scientist had rushed at him and thrown his arms round his middle. Peter felt his breath hot on his cheek; the next moment a blow on the head from behind brought oblivion.

Horstman lowered his weapon, a short piece of weighted rubber-tubing, and bending his huge body over the prostrate man, pulled off the spectacles, and catching sight of the grey hair, twitched away the wig.

"It's him right enough, blast him," he squeaked.

Sir Mortimer bent over and examined the white face.

"It is," he agreed. "The young fool! A clever disguise, though, Horstman, eh? A lucky chance you had that chat with Tom Damon—I thought such excessive interest in those rocks seemed peculiar. Pah!—it's too easy. Get him under quickly and take him along."

A minute later the field was empty, save for Sir Mortimer Drude, walking thoughtfully towards the road.

## (ii)

"So it amounts to this, my adventurous young friend—you are at last absolutely in my power; absolutely, you understand, without the remotest chance of escape or of being rescued. Make no mistake about it, Mr. Brown, this time you are going to decease; I am not going to delegate such an important business

to other people again. I am going to kill you, and in my own way; and from what I understand it will be neither sudden nor pleasant."

Peter, lying on the floor of an inner room, his hands and feet tightly bound, did not answer. His voice might not be so steady as he wished, and he refused to give this man the satisfaction of knowing that he was afraid. And he was afraid—there was no denying it. But mingled with his fear was another emotion—disgust with himself for allowing himself to fall into such a simple trap as the one Sir Mortimer had set. At such times a man's self-criticism is apt to err on the side of severity, and when the other seated himself on the edge of the table and spoke again, Peter had to admit that his strictures were just.

"You are a fool, you know, Brown," he said candidly. "You have no brains. It really gives me very little satisfaction to beat a man of your mental calibre—you fall so easily. I am perfectly willing to admit that up to the present the extraordinary vendetta which you have thought fit to engage in against me and my interests has met with a certain amount of success. But if you will take the trouble to analyse that success I think you will find that it has been principally due to the element of luck, coupled perhaps with a little of that recklessness which is the result of an incapacity to measure risks at their true value. You are a failure my friend, and I hope you realize it. I know your sort well. , You are one of those ineffable young men who have taken the place of the strong, silent hero in modern sensational fiction: stupid, muscular, brainless creatures who think that all that matters

in life is to be a sportsman and a good fellow; whose main ambition is to roll little balls over the grass into silly tin holes in a smaller number of strokes than anyone else; whose creed is good form and whose only commandment is 'Thou shalt not do what is not done'; who accept ready-made conventions and opinions but scorn ready-made clothes; who affect to despise intellectuality, and all it stands for—the things I stand for . . . Why, I do not suppose you have ever really tried to think about a thing in your whole life! And yet just because your ideas are not my ideas and your conventions are not my conventions, you presume not only to judge my actions, but actually to step in and say this and this shall not be done! Who are you, pray, to be the arbiter of my behaviour? What special qualification do you possess which entitles you to question my judgment on affairs or decide the legality or otherwise of my actions?"

Sir Mortimer's voice, which had begun quietly enough, had grown shriller as he proceeded, until his final words were almost a scream. His eyeballs protruded and a fleck of foam appeared on his lips. Leaving the table he approached the bound man.

"Well, you young puppy, can't you speak?" he snarled. "What do you mean by playing the spy and following me about? Isn't it enough to have half the secret-police of Europe to deal with without having to suffer the impertinence of your damnable intrusion! Answer me!—or, by God, I'll find means to make you!"

He stood over his prisoner shaking like a man in some kind of fit. Painful as the exhibition was, its

effect on Peter was to harden into a certainty the long-held suspicion that he had to do with a madman. And with the conviction came a gleam of hope. Had he not heard that it was sometimes possible to deceive the most cunning madman by a simple ruse through which normal people would see at once?

"Your threats are very fine, Sir Mortimer," he said quietly. "I'm just wondering if they'll sound as fine in a couple of hours' time."

The scientist composed himself with an effort. "A couple of hours' time! What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Simply this. That unless you release me at once I'm afraid things are going to be rather unpleasant for you in two or three hours' time."

"Oh, this is very interesting. And pray what is likely to happen to me in two or three hours' time if I don't release you at once?" asked Sir Mortimer with a sneer.

"You called me a fool just now," said Peter. "Don't you think the word might be more fittingly applied to you for supposing for an instant that I should be so rash as to venture out in your company without taking ample precautions against trickery? I took good care to inform the hotel people I was going out with you and should probably spend the evening at 'St. Cloud'. They will certainly want to know where I am if I'm not back by a certain hour."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, Mr. Brown, that doesn't follow at all," declared the other, shaking his head. "I assure you you are quite mistaken. I might, for instance, 'phone the hotel and inform them that you have

changed your mind and decided to stay the night. But I have other plans in view. I think, in fact I am sure, that we parted soon after examining the dolmen, and I last saw you walking in the direction of the Coupée. A dangerous place, the Coupée, Mr. Brown, especially if anyone should take it into his head to climb down. What is to prevent your mangled body from being found at the foot of the cliffs to-morrow morning? I know of nothing to stop it, in fact it seems to be the obvious solution to the difficulty of disposing of your body—always supposing that your body hasn't been mutilated previously, of course. . . ."

He stopped, while a look of unholy anticipation stole into his face. But if Peter felt a renewed chill of fear at the innuendo he gave no sign.

"Not very original and not very convincing, I'm afraid, Sir Mortimer," he replied steadily. "You see, the hotel people aren't the only ones who happen to be interested in my safety. I can assure you that if anything happens to me, it's as certain as anything on earth that you'll hang for my murder. The situation is a very different one to when you had me at your mercy at Okewood Hall. Then not a soul except the members of your household knew where I was. In a few days' time the whole world will know the truth about Dr. Reddieson."

"And I can assure you I am prepared for every emergency," said the other blandly. "Even if what you say is true your friends would arrive here only to find me gone. There are peculiarities about this house, Mr. Brown, that would make a search a difficult and dangerous undertaking. I agree, however, with what

you say about the unwisdom of allowing your body to be found at the foot of the Coupée. Possibly the air-shaft of the old silver-mine would suffice instead... or even . . . However, that may be decided later. Time is getting on, and we must get to business."

He rang the bell and Copping appeared. "Tell Horstman I'm ready now. Then go and tell Mrs. Black to ask Miss Una to be good enough to come down."

A few minutes later Horstman limped heavily into the room. "Come round, has he?—good!" he exclaimed in a voice of satisfaction as his eyes fell on Peter, and he began to laugh shrilly, rubbing his great hands together.

And then Una Drude came in, followed by a lean, forbidding-looking woman of sixty. One glance Peter gave at the girl: noted the great change in her appearance, the white, thinned face and the dark eyes, which seemed to him to be unnaturally large; and thereafter he kept his own gaze fixed on the ceiling.

"You wanted me," she began, and stopped as she saw Peter.

With a look Sir Mortimer dismissed the elderly woman; then he turned to his niece with a malicious smile.

"I think, Una, you have met Mr. Brown before," he said in his silkiest tones. "In a Devonshire lane, was it not? When he was dressed as a clergyman, unless I am mistaken—ah! you remember now, do you! Mr. Brown has been kind enough to honour me with a further visit, attired this time, as you see, in the garb of an elderly gentleman. Strange, this

fancy for disguises, is it not? Mr. Brown—my niece, Miss Una Drude."

Narrowly watching the girl as he effected this ironical introduction, during which Peter was made to feel the menace underlying the suave sentences, the scientist saw a flush of colour steal into her cheeks, and the sight seemed to goad him into a kind of wild fury.

"Yes, you may well blush, you—!" he said in a voice that shook, and the unspeakable word set Peter struggling impotently at his bonds. "Perhaps it escapes your memory that if it was not for your ridiculous infatuation for this man we should still——"

"Stop it!" cried Peter, beside himself with anger. "Leave her alone, damn you! Leave her alone, I say!" He made another frantic effort to free himself and Horstman tittered gleefully. "If I had only half an arm free——"

"Delightful!—most excellent!" crooned the scientist, clapping his hands gently together. "Quite in accordance with the best traditions of melodrama."

"Have you brought me down here simply to insult me?" the girl asked scornfully.

"On the contrary, my dear Una, I have brought you down especially to show you a little exhibition. Doubtless you cherish the view that your Mr. Brown is a gallant hero, brave in adversity and uncomplaining in misfortune. Well, I am going to show you what he is really like. You shall see him whining piteously for mercy, like the skulking cur he is. I trust the spectacle will be edifying."

"You'll have to wait a long time for that," said

Peter contemptuously. "I wouldn't beg a favour of a hound like you if I was at my last gasp!"

"We shall see," replied Sir Mortimer complacently. "Tie his eyes up Horstman, and put him on his feet."

He was lifted into an upright position, and a handkerchief tied round his head. The next moment a painful blow on the mouth sent him headlong, and he heard the high voice of Horstman tittering with laughter. Actuated by an overwhelming impulse Una started forward, but Sir Mortimer caught her by the wrist and held her, grinning wickedly.

"You coward! Oh, you vile coward!" she cried, struggling fiercely but in vain to release herself. "Let me go, you fiend! You devil!"

"That'll do, Una, that'll do," warned Sir Mortimer in a dangerous voice. "Or I may find cause to mete out something of the same to you. D'you hear that?"

He scowled at her, and then, suddenly swinging her round, he flung her into a chair. Then he once more ordered Horstman to stand Peter on his feet. But no sooner was Peter in an upright position than another blow on the face sent him down again, with such a rage in his heart as he had never known before.

"By God, Horstman, if ever I get my hands on you —" he began in a strangled voice, for the last fall had jerked the handkerchief from his eyes and he could see who his assailant was.

Horstman kicked him violently in the ribs.

"But you won't—see? You won't get the chance!" squeaked the giant. "Who pushed me in the river when I wasn't lookin'? You did, didn't yer?—well, now I'm payin' yer back. Payin' yer back in yer own

coin! If I 'ad my way I'd twist the head off yer ruddy shoulders, blast you!"

There was a kick between each sentence that made Peter gasp with the pain of it, but at this point Sir Mortimer interposed.

"That'll do for now, Horstman," he said authoritatively. "I don't want him dead yet. I haven't finished with you yet, my friend," he added, addressing Peter. "That was merely a little preliminary chastisement to get you used to it. Beginning to wish you'd never had anything to do with the business, eh?"

Peter did not answer. At the moment he could not have spoken if his life had depended on it. It was the first time he had ever been bullied without having a chance of retaliating on the bully, and the knowledge stuck in his throat and almost choked him.

Sir Mortimer's eyes switched round to his niece.

"I'm wondering if a little chastisement wouldn't be good for you, too, my lady," he said reflectively. "What do you say, Horstman?"

"All the same to me, guv'nor," piped Horstman.

It was at this moment that a sudden wild hope sprang up in Peter's heart. He had moved his arms and discovered that the rope which bound him had become slack.

"Bring her over here," said Sir Mortimer peremptorily.

"Don't you dare lay your filthy hands on me!" cried Una, springing to her feet as Horstman moved in her direction. "Uncle, if you allow him to touch me——"

"If you speak like that to me, Una," interrupted Sir Mortimer, "I'll tie your mouth up!"

"Speak!—You dare to tell me not to speak, after——"

With a sudden movement Sir Mortimer placed one hand roughly over her mouth before she realized his intention, and gripping the back of her head with the other hand, shook it vigorously; then he let her go. And once again Horstman chuckled.

Una looked at her uncle with flashing eyes. "This is the end of everything," she said vehemently. "I hate you! I hate you more than I thought I could hate any man. For years I trusted you, gave you my affection . . . even when you kept me here a prisoner I tried to think well of you . . . now that's over. Do what you like with me, I'm past caring."

She turned her back contemptuously, and Peter stealthily enlarged the slack of the rope. Indeed, he felt that he could now withdraw both arms without difficulty. Only a little longer and he would be able to rise to his feet. . . .

"Bring her over here," said Sir Mortimer again.

With an evil smile Horstman caught hold of the girl's wrist and swung her round so that she faced the room. At the same time Sir Mortimer walked sharply towards them both. For the moment the backs of both men were turned towards Peter. It was his opportunity at last.

Something in the girl's expression made the scientist glance over his shoulder, and what he saw made him cry out in alarm. For Brown on his feet, his face white and tense, his whole body crouched as if for a spring. Even as Sir Mortimer beheld him he gave two tremendous hops towards Horstman, who released

the girl with an oath and tried to get into a position of defence. But Horstman was no boxer. Peter made a quick feint for the mark; down went the giant's guard; and then, with every ounce of his thirteen stone behind his arm, Peter hit him a terrible blow on the jaw. Owing to his feet being tied together the blow was not timed as perfectly as he could have wished, but it did not fail in its intention. Horstman went over like a falling tower and lay still, while Sir Mortimer shouted for help at the top of his voice.

Peter, hampered by the rope round his legs, realized that escape was impossible, and unmindful of the bursting in of the door and the inrush of men into the room, he went up to the girl and put one arm round her shoulder. In that hectic moment it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to do.

"He didn't hurt you, I hope?" he said, smiling down at her.

She smiled back at him and said something which in the uproar he could not hear. And the next instant, urged on by Sir Mortimer, who was yelling to them to take him alive, the men were upon him. His right hand was still tingling from contact with Horstman's jaw, but he nevertheless tried to defend himself. One he felled at a blow, and another staggered out of the fray gasping for breath, but the odds were farcical. He had a vision of the thin face of Sir Mortimer in the background, baring his teeth like a wild animal, his pale eyes shining with excitement. And then, even as he had knocked out Horstman, a fist caught him on the chin and knocked him senseless; and they all crowded round and looked down at him.

"Everyone out of the room except Copping and Bates," cried Sir Mortimer. Then, when the room had cleared, he stood gazing at his fallen enemy.

"What are you going to do with him now?" asked Mr. Newsome Eversdale, who had entered the room while the fight was in progress.

"Do!" said the scientist, lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers. "God in Heaven, but if he were to die now I think I should go out of my mind. He shall die with agonizing slowness, Eversdale, with every nerve flinching; he shall see his death approaching, inch by inch, until he screams for mercy. Oh, I'll make no mistake about Mr. Peter Brown this time." His voice trembled with the intensity of his hatred. "He shall go in the cave, Eversdale."

"Not to the—?" The other did not complete his sentence, but gazed at the scientist with a startled expression. "You don't seem to love him exactly, Mortimer," he added with a short laugh.

"Love him? Dear God!" Sir Mortimer raised his clenched fists to Heaven, and his lips moved silently.

Eversdale glanced at him again curiously, and then shrugged his shoulders. After all, it was no concern of his. And it was just then that he noticed, behind Copping and the man Bates, who were bending over Horstman, the figure of Una Drude. She was very pale, and her eyes were fixed intently on her uncle's face.

"Hello, Miss Una," he said with a forced smile, "I'm sorry you've had to witness a scene like this."

Her gaze met his across the room. "Not at all, Mr. Eversdale, thank you," she answered composedly. "I assure you it has been most illuminating."

She seemed on the point of saying something further, and then, appearing to change her mind, she gave one glance at Peter's prostrate form, and quietly left the room. Sir Mortimer immediately followed her.

## CHAPTER XI

### CEPHALOPEDA

### (1)

For the second time within a few hours our Mr. Brown recovered consciousness, to find himself lying on his back in complete darkness. His head ached intolerably and he was conscious of a feeling of acute nausea, but there was present none of that confused groping towards mental clarity which characterizes the return to consciousness of most men who have been knocked insensible by a blow on the jaw. On the contrary, the events preceding his lapse into insensibility were singularly vivid in his recollection, and when he put out one hand to feel the surface of the floor on which he lay, and discovered it to be bare rock, he realized at once that he was in some kind of underground cave or cellar, and in all probability still a prisoner. A peculiar fetid smell and a certain heaviness in the atmosphere suggested that the chamber was a small one, possessing little communication with the outer air, while an occasional muffled thud and the subdued murmur of moving water told him that the sea was not far distant.

He shifted his legs, and discovered with some

surprise that he was unbound. Painfully rising into a sitting position, he felt under his left armpit, where he had strapped the pistol-holster. The holster was still there, but the pistol was gone. He went through his pockets hurriedly. Nothing else seemed to have been removed. On the contrary his possessions had been augmented by a cylindrical object which had certainly not been in his pocket when he left the hotel. It was an electric-torch, and he switched it on.

He was lying in a natural cave, close to a glistening wall on which several unpleasant-looking insects were scurrying for shelter in the sudden light of his torch. Remembering Sir Mortimer's predilection for animal life, Peter scrambled hastily to his feet, only to call himself a fool the next moment, for these were obviously nothing but the natural denizens of the cave. He gave a short laugh of self-contempt. There was no doubt his nerves were in a shocking condition. He leant against the wall, breathing quickly, shining the torch round the cavern. And what he saw both scared and puzzled him.

The chamber was some forty feet wide and roughly rectangular in shape. The place where he stood appeared to be a ledge which ran round three sides of the cave, the edge falling sheer into unknown depths. Creeping to the brim he could see the reflection of water fifteen feet below. He shuddered as he thought of his fate if, in the darkness, he had staggered into the pool, for the sides were like the walls of a house. Doubtless that had been Sir Mortimer's intention—but why in the name of common sense provide him with a torch, when a torch was, in the circumstances, the

one thing likely to save his life? He wondered if Una had somehow managed to slip it unobserved into his pocket; or perhaps it was Copping, who wasn't a bad sort of fellow. . . .

He dismissed the conundrum as unanswerable, and proceeded to explore his prison. Almost at once he came upon the door to this singular cave; it was set in the wall opposite the blank end, and looked as if nothing in the world would open it but the key. Several times he threw himself against it desperately, but it easily withstood his efforts. It was clear there was no escape that way. He continued to explore. Five minutes later he was back in his original position, feeling his chances of ever getting out of the cave to be hopeless. Short of finding some subterranean tunnel communicating with the sea, it looked as if he would be left there till he starved.

The idea of there being some under-water communication with the sea gave him the tenth part of a hope, and he went to the edge again and peered down. There was certainly an opening somewhere, for he could clearly see the marks of high tide seven or eight feet above the level of the water. Yet the surface was quite undisturbed, which seemed to prove that communication with the sea was at a considerable depth.

As he flashed his torch about he noticed a peculiar feature of the ledge by the door, which, unlike those on either side, fell back like a shelf. He could see now that it was artificial, and apparently made of concrete. It was, in fact, a platform, and Peter wondered for what purpose it had been constructed. Like the natural ledges on either side of the cave, it was about

ten feet wide, and was not unlike a large diving-board. Absorbed in his conjectures as to its purpose he was startled by a sudden rippling of the water below him and instantly shone his torch in the direction of the sound.

Emerging from the water was the most frightful-looking object he had ever beheld. As his horrified gaze took in the two enormous eyes, the loathsome ragged head, and the curious umbrella-like formation of the body, he thought at first it must be some strange nightmare of a fish of a species unknown to him. And then an incredibly long tapering arm rose from the pool and wavered uncertainly in the air, and he knew why he had been left unbound in the cave. It was a gigantic octopus.

Panic gripped him—that cruel, hopeless panic which crushes reason and leaves its victim temporarily paralysed. Like a man hypnotized into immobility, with dilated eyes he watched the creature propel itself leisurely to the end of the pool; saw it clamp itself to the rock, and stretch three of its tentacles slowly towards him, and still he did not move. He felt the sweat start from his forehead. In a strange, almost subconscious way he noticed that one of the tentacles had been cut or broken off, and idly wondered what could have caused it. Higher they came, so that in the glare of the torch he could see the fine whip-like ends with their twin rows of suckers. And then the spell broke. With a yell he sprang backward to the wall and stood trembling, waiting for the tentacles to rise above the level of the ledge. Would they be long enough to reach the walls? This was the question

that burned itself in his brain, for if the monster could reach him where he stood, there was not the shadow of a hope. The rocky ledges were higher than the concrete platform by several feet, and to attempt to escape by running to the other ledge would only precipitate matters. Besides which, the ledge he was now on was if anything the higher of the two.

He tried to remember whether an octopus worked by sight or smell; but, before he could decide, one of the tentacles appeared over the ledge and moved towards him, grotesquely reminding him of the outstretched arm of a man playing blind-man's buff. And the next moment, with renewed terror, he saw another tentacle appear further down the ledge. This, too, explored the surface with horrible deliberation, and then stopped motionless, lying right across the path. Meanwhile the first tentacle had stopped also, about four feet away, its end, which was slightly flattened like a ribbon, waving aimlessly in the air. Peter remembered the tide-marks in the pool; the water had still five or six feet to rise. He became aware of a strong inclination to take a running jump into the pool, and end the business. Anything was better than this waiting for death. And such a death! Sir Mortimer was getting his revenge all right.

And then, from the direction of the platform, there came with startling suddenness the sound of loud, high-pitched laughter. Immediately following there was a faint click, and the cavern was lit by electric light in the roof which Peter had failed to notice.

With an effort he moved his eyes from the threaten-

ing tentacle a few feet away and glanced towards the door. A trap had opened in one of the upper panels, and Horstman, with a bandaged face, was grinning at him. So they had come to view the kill, had they? Well, at least they shouldn't have the satisfaction of knowing that he was afraid.

"Hee-hee!" tittered Horstman. "Quite a nice little picture. All accordin' to Cocker, as they say. Didn't expect to see me again so soon, did yer?"

Peter did not answer. It seemed to him—it might have been imagination—that the tentacles had moved a few inches nearer, and he was conscious of a wild longing to throw himself on Horstman's mercy, to plead with him to shoot the monster—anything to end his torture. Fiercely he choked the weakness down. Whatever happened he would not give this brute the satisfaction of speech.

"Lost the use of yer tongue, eh?" Horstman thrust his great head through the trap and peered down into the pool. "Ah well, you'll lose more than that before the next half-hour's up. Plucky, ain't yer—knockin' folks down when they ain't lookin'?"

Peter continued to ignore him. By not so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he show that he was aware of the giant's presence, and Horstman, who in his limited way had probably expected that Peter would make some sort of appeal to him, began to get annoyed. There was, after all, not much fun in taunting an unresponsive man.

"A ruddy little coward!" he cried through the trap. "A blasted, ruddy little quitter, that's what you are." He paused expectantly; and then, as Peter

still remained silent, his temper increased. "And you needn't pretend as you can't hear me, either!" he added shrilly. "Just you wait!—just you wait till the tide's a bit higher, that's all. You'll ruddy well soon find your tongue then, I reckon!"

Peter's reply was to yawn slowly and elaborately, as if in the last extremity of boredom, and it was this yawn which did that for which he had scarcely dared to hope. It seems possible to believe that Horstman's original intention was only to jeer at his victim through the trap, but that his ungovernable temper, fired by Peter's assumed indifference, overcame his caution. At any rate, there was the sound of a key being turned, the door opened, and he stood on the threshold of the cave, his face red with passion. He held a revolver in one hand.

"I'll teach you to yawn in my face," he shouted angrily in his high-pitched voice. "What's to stop me shootin' you now, I'd like to know?" His eyes fell on the tentacles of the octopus: the nearest was fully twenty feet away, so he came out upon the platform. "I'll plug you through the 'ead, blast you, if you can't speak civil and answer. D'ye hear?"

Peter thought rapidly. If he rushed Horstman suddenly, and succeeded in avoiding the tentacle stretched across the path, the giant might either retreat through the door or attempt to shoot him as he rushed, most probably the latter. Remembering what Bridgewater had told him at Tregenneth about Horstman's poor marksmanship with a pistol he determined to risk the attempt. Unarmed as he was with nothing but a heavy torch, it was a desperate

course to take, yet what other was there? Better surely to be shot down by Horstman than fall a victim to the creature in the pool.

And just as he was collecting himself for the effort he saw something that sent his pulses racing with a wild hope. The two tentacles on the ledge were still motionless, but under the platform, unseen by Horstman, another was creeping silently upwards, like some enormous serpent. If only he could hold Horstman's attention a little longer! He decided to abandon his air of indifference, and as his lips began to move a grin of satisfaction spread over Horstman's face.

"Shoot away!" Peter remarked carelessly. "It would be about your form to take pot-shots at an unarmed man. I can't stop you, you know that. Incidentally, what's this place used for, Horstman? I'm rather curious to know." He took a deep breath; the strain of acting naturally while that undulating arm crept steadily nearer the platform was almost unbearable. The tentacle was now within a couple of feet of the top, and still Horstman hadn't seen it. "What are these electric-lights in the roof for? Peter added, and his voice cracked.

Horstman evidently mistook this for a sign of fear for his grin widened as he cast his eyes to the roof.

"Experiments, if you want to know," he squeaked, and glanced down as something touched his foot. At the same moment Peter, utterly unable to restrain himself even though the action cost him his life, gave a yell of warning. But it was too late.

With extraordinary rapidity the thin, whip-like tentacle had twisted round the man's ankle, and was

pulling him towards the edge of the platform. Horstman screamed and fired his revolver madly at the body of the octopus, while Peter, regardless now of anything but the fact that a fellow-creature was being dragged to a dreadful death, dashed to his help. But the platform, when he reached it, was empty.

One glance only he gave into the pool; then, utterly sickened by what he saw, he managed to stagger through the door and close it behind him. Then he fainted.

A little later, coming to himself, he found he was in a natural rock-tunnel, on which was laid an artificial concrete path, leading to the door of the cave. Not for anything would he have gone through that door again. In front the path ascended steeply, and he followed it for a long distance until it branched into another. At the junction he hesitated before deciding which way to take, finally resolving to continue uphill. Soon he came upon a flight of steps, at the top of which was a door. Switching out his light he cautiously tried the handle. It opened easily.

(II)

Alphonse, the chef at "St. Cloud," was in an uncommonly bad temper. What had upset him none knew, but so unpleasant had his manner and language been all day that Fred, his assistant in the kitchen, as he took the dirty dishes out of the service-lift which communicated with the dining-room upstairs, was strongly minded to throw them at Alphonse's head.

The knowledge that Alphonse, when roused, was inclined to take violent physical exercise—usually at another's expense—restrained him; and he therefore relieved his feelings in the time-honoured manner by grousing at the world in general.

"'Arf-past eleven an' only just finished," he grumbled. "I tell you I'm fair sick o' this job."

Alphonse, instead of commenting on this observation, pointed to the dirty dishes.

"To-night," he said gruffly, "you will wash up."

"What?" demanded the other indignantly. "Wash up now? At this time o' night?"

Alphonse lowered his weight carefully into a chair and placidly lit a cigarette. "Take this tray," he ordered, pointing again. "Then come back for the other." And he closed his eyes with an air of finality.

His assistant glared at him as if he would have liked to kill him. Then, with an angry gesture, he picked up the tray and walked resentfully into the back-kitchen. The door shut with a bang.

Alphonse opened his eyes and frowned at the closed door. Then he looked at the second tray of dishes. Several minutes passed and his scowl deepened. This was downright insubordination. Did Fred dare to think he could disobey him, Alphonse? Jumping up with more alacrity than one would have supposed possible in a person of his bulk, he marched to the door with the light of battle in his eyes.

Throwing wide the door he opened his mouth to pour forth the torrent of invective which the situation demanded, when an arm was twisted round his neck and the next instant he was sprawling face-downward

on the floor in the grip of an exceedingly unpleasant arm-lock.

"Don't make a sound," said a quiet voice. "If you do I shall have to break your arm, and I know you'd hate that. Your other arm, please. That's better." He felt his wrists being tied together. "I'm sorry to be so rough with you, but it can't be helped, and you aren't the only one. No, your friend isn't visible, he's tied up in that cupboard, where I'm going to put you in a minute when you've answered my questions. And I needn't add that if you attempt to call for help I shall most certainly kill you. Just wait till I've tied your feet up."

His boots having been lashed together with their own laces Alphonse was rolled over. When he saw who his assailant was his cheeks paled.

"Yes, it's me," nodded Peter. "Didn't expect to see me again so soon, did you? I seem to have a recollection of seeing your fairy face among the crowd before I was bowled out. Tell me, have Pagleiro and Kreller arrived?"

The man was silent.

Peter sighed. "I'm not a cruel man, but I must admit there are merits in the methods of the Middle Ages," he said regretfully. "It would be so easy to tie a shoelace round your forehead and twist it with a pencil until you answered—and it might save me a deal of trouble."

Forthwith he proceeded to gag his victim with a handkerchief, and then, dragging him to the cupboard, bundled him in beside his companion and turned the key. This done, he closed the door and went into the

kitchen, where he stood listening. Apparently his encounter with the two men had not attracted attention.

As he listened he became aware of the murmur of conversation, which puzzled him for a moment, since it seemed to come from the direction of the wall facing him, which, as he knew, gave on to a passage. And then he could have kicked himself for his stupidity—the service lift, of course! Here was a piece of sheer gratuitous luck. He thrust his head in the lift and listened again. Conversation was certainly going on amongst a number of people in the room above, but to his disappointment he could distinguish no words. And more than anything else in the world just then he wanted to overhear what was being said in that room. Had he not heard Sir Mortimer say that Pagleiro, Kreller, and probably others were coming that night to a conference? It looked as if he would have to try to listen outside the door, a very hazardous undertaking.

And then a wild notion entered his head. The lift was sufficiently large to enable a man to squeeze in with an effort, and it worked on the endless-rope system. It took food up and down—why shouldn't it take him? That he would run a tremendous risk he fully realized. The pulley at the top might squeak, the rope break, the doors at the top might be open. With Peter, however, to think of a plan of this nature was to act, and tucking himself into the lift he began to haul himself slowly up the shaft.

Fortune was with him. The door of the lift-opening was shut, and he could hear every word said.

(iii)

Mr. Newsome Eversdale forced a cigarette into a thin amber holder and, having lit it, allowed his keen gaze to travel slowly round the table.

"Well, gentlemen, I shall not detain you for long to-night. You all have your instructions, and I am perfectly confident in your ability to carry them out without any further advice from me. There are, however, one or two points to be considered, and as this is probably the last opportunity we shall have for discussion before our operations begin, it may be as well to mention them now.

He paused to readjust his monocle and glanced at a slip of paper in his hand. For all the emotion in his level, slightly drawling voice, he might have been taking the chair at the committtee-meeting of some suburban tennis-club. It was only when one considered his audience that it could be seen that here was a set of men of very different calibre. With the exception of Sir Mortimer Drude they one and all bore on their countenances those unmistakable marks which indicate the man who lives on the weaknesses of humanity; hard-bitten and unscrupulous, utterly devoid of those considerations of kindness and conscience which link society together, but formidable, full of character and the ability to pursue their own interests with resolution and decision.

It was Pagleiro, the swarthy little fat man, who answered. "We are all attention," he said agreeably. "But first of all, these walls—" He waved an arm with

the expansive gesture of the Southerner and looked quickly round the room. "Are they . . .?"

"They are," replied Eversdale with some shortness; and then, after once more referring to the paper, he went on; "First of all there is the matter of the *Queen Anne*. The fact of her being delayed in the Mediterranean necessitates a slight readjustment of our plans. Obviously, all our operations must take place on the same day, and in order to allow the *Queen Anne* time to reach Devonport I am therefore postponing the date by ten days. There will be no difficulty about that, I suppose?"

"It can be done, of course," Pagleiro observed. "But it will be a pity."

Kreller, who sat on Eversdale's right, next to a silent man with a black beard, gave a harsh laugh.

"A pity!" he cried. "It would be madness. Insanity! Rather than that the dispositions should be changed at this hour I would advocate leaving out Devonport altogether. There are still Portsmouth, Chatham and Portland. And will there not be other warships at Devonport besides the *Queen Anne?* Pah! What is the *Queen Anne* that she should upset all our arrangements!"

"She happens, my dear Kreller, to be the most powerful battle-cruiser afloat to-day, and easily the biggest vessel in the British Navy," returned Eversdale mildly. "If you can suggest any other warship whose destruction would shake England to an equal extent, I shall be most happy to consider it."

Kreller eyed him fiercely. "And does that warrant running the risk of endangering the whole plan through

delay?" he demanded. "I am a believer in timetables and sticking to them. The *Queen Anne* is only one ship, and we are going to destroy six in England alone. It isn't as if we are one nation going to make war on another. Our aim is intimidation. We have got to prove to England, France and Italy that we possess a weapon against which there is no defence, and are determined to make use of it until they meet our demands. Whether we prove it by blowing up battleships or the Houses of Parliament cannot matter a tinker's curse, so long as we only impress them with our power. Therefore I say, let the arrangements stand. One battle-cruiser more or less can make no difference whatever."

Eversdale shook his head. "You don't understand the psychology of the British people," he said. "On the surface you might not suppose they cared a jot whether they had a navy or not, so little interest do they seem to take in it. But in their heart of hearts it's the most sacred pride of their lives. They've stuck Nelson on top of a great column in a London square, and it typifies the position the navy holds in their vanity. And the *Queen Anne* is at present the flower of the flock. It's as important in their eyes as the old *Dreadnought* was in Fisher's day; it's their proudest possession, and they are as keen on it as a child with a new toy. Its destruction would rank as a national disaster; far more than half a dozen other battleships put together. Coupled with the blowing-up of the other five, the moral effect on the nation is bound to be incalculable."

"Very well, very well," grumbled Kreller impatiently.

"It is for you to decide. I have made my protest. It is enough for me to look after the fools I have under me in Italy."

Pagleiro laughed. "You are not very well to-night, are you, Franz, my friend. *Mon Dieu!* Nor do I wonder! You should buy a bigger motor-boat, Sir Mortimer, and your guests would arrive in a better temper."

"We may regard that as settled then. The date will be August the tenth instead of the first." Eversdale carefully readjusted his monocle. "The next question is the ultimatums. I suggest that as soon as these have been delivered to the heads of the governments concerned, copies be sent to the leading organs of the Press in time for insertion in the morning editions. It does not follow that they will print them, of course; they may choose to regard the matter as a hoax. But the very fact of their being received will contribute to that mental attitude of uncertainty we wish to bring about." He smiled grimly. "And you may be in no doubt as to whether they will print them when they find that the very threat which they contain has been carried out."

"How long do you suppose it will take before we bring them to their senses?" asked the man with the black beard.

"That is a question I can't answer," replied Eversdale with a laugh. "If I could it would simplify matters considerably. You may be sure we shall have to give more than two or three demonstrations of what we are capable before we convince them we mean business. No notice will be taken the first time, obviously. They will simply look upon our threat as the work of

a lunatic. It will be a different matter when the next batch of warships is blown up a week later, but even then I hardly anticipate any weakening. There will, perhaps, be a few signs of panic—not much, especially in Italy, where belief in authority is strong—but perceptible to a keen observer. Remember, an unknown danger is always more to be dreaded than a known. As each nation's morale becomes affected there will be a corresponding reaction in the world of finance. There will be a tension in the air, a knife-edge of expectancy. There may even be some mobilization of armies. And then, at the right moment, when the fever of disquiet is at its height, I shall launch the next ultimatum. You will, of course, receive the instructions through the usual channels. And this time, as you know, instead of warships we shall threaten to destroy things of more permanent value . . . Westminster and Whitehall . . . Windsor Castle . . . The Louvre . . . ."

For ten minutes he went on speaking, while a man, crouched behind the door of the service-lift, listened with an ever-growing amazement as the full extent of the diabolical plot was unfolded. He felt he must be dreaming, and that he should wake up and find himself in his bed at the hotel. That such a scheme, involving the possible loss of human life, should be calmly discussed by half a dozen men in a commonplace modern dining-room, seemed outside the possibilities of ordinary existence. He had the sudden illusion that they were playing some monstrous kind of charades, and would presently stop and converse like ordinary mortals.

Pagleiro was speaking now, his foreign accent strongly marked.

"The sum of money to be paid—what have you fixed upon? You had not decided last month."

Eversdale's voice replied, suave and cultured. "One per cent of the national income in each case. In England, for example, that will work out at about eight million pounds. A mere trifle, of course—only a little more than the cost of the *Queen Anne*. Less than a quarter of what Great Britain pays annually to the United States. Anything else?"

"There is!" Kreller brought his clenched fist down on the table. "I say again, Eversdale, it's nothing less than lunacy to change our original date. Every moment that we put off time increases the danger of our position. I am not such a fool as to suppose that because the police are silent they are inactive. We know they have some inkling of our plans, and they know of the rays. Do you imagine they aren't moving heaven and earth to get on our tracks? For the present not a soul knows our meeting-place here, but at any moment discovery may come. I am not an alarmist but the world is a small place, and our enemies are too many for my liking."

"No," said Eversdale thoughtfully. "As you say not a soul knows our whereabouts—except one; and by now—"

"Except one? What one?" demanded Kreller fiercely.

Eversdale replied in the drawling voice Peter had heard the previous night. "What do you say his name is, Mortimer? I could never work up the

same interest in the man as you. Brown, isn't it?"

"Brown! That swine again!" Kreller swore vigorously. "What in hell has he been doing now? I thought he was put away weeks ago."

"On the contrary, he's very much alive—or he was a few hours ago," said Eversdale with a chuckle.

For the first time Sir Mortimer Drude spoke. "He is probably dead by now," he observed grimly.

"I should think so," cried Kreller. "He should have been killed before. Where is he now?"

In a few words Sir Mortimer explained the circumstances of the ruse by the cromlech and the subsequent uproar in the study.

"A man of spirit and enterprise," said Pagleiro when he had finished. "So that explains why Horstman didn't fetch us in the boat. What have you done with him?"

"Horstman? We left him on his bed to recover."

"The man Brown, I mean."

Sir Mortimer gave a sardonic laugh and glanced at his watch. "High-tide is in about half an hour's time. By now I should think it extremely likely he is gone where he will cease to trouble us further. An extraordinary specimen of *Cephalopeda,* my dear Pagleiro, of the sub-order *Decapoda,* and I think *Ommatostrephidae.*"

"Talk English," growled Kreller.

"In other words an octopus of a singularly large size that happens to live in a cave under the island. It is, indeed, too big to get out, but fortunately there is a small hole communicating with the sea through which crabs and other stupid fish persist in coming,

so it continues to survive. I myself used it to experiment upon with my rays in the early stages."

"Well?" Kreller demanded.

"Is it necessary to tell you the rest?" asked Sir Mortimer. "I give you credit for imagination, Franz."

Kreller gazed at the scientist with distasteful eyes.

"You're a cold-blooded devil, Drude," he muttered. "But listen, tell me this. How do you know he was here alone? How do you know he hasn't friends on this island who know where he is, and are at this moment getting in touch with the police?"

"If he has any friends they haven't helped him much," said Eversdale with a short laugh. "He arrived alone, you said, didn't you, Mortimer?"

The scientist nodded. "Yes. He came alone, and so far as I have been able to discover he remained alone. As for his friends in England, what can they prove, whatever they may think? Let them come and search the island and see what they can find."

"You say there is some doubt about his being dead yet," Pagleiro remarked, puffing a cloud of smoke from his thick lips. "Well, if he is still alive, have him in here and ask him. I will soon find out whether he is working alone or not."

There was silence for a space, and Peter in the service-lift shivered involuntarily. He began to think it was time to be making a move.

"Years ago in what you call Algeria," Pagleiro went on, "there was once a trader from the Epiros—a Greek, and rich, but obstinate. There was also a man from the mountains, a Cheg, who you would

probably call a brigand, and he wanted certain information from the Greek. I repeat, the Greek was an obstinate man, but he told. Shall I tell you why? Because the other knew how to make him. Because I was that other man. There is much that may be done with a cigar, or even a cigarette. But then, perhaps, as you say, he is already dead."

Sir Mortimer rose and pressed a bell, and Copping entered.

## (IV)

But before Sir Mortimer had given his orders, Peter, whose fingers were nearly paralysed with cramp through gripping the ropes, was silently slipping down the lift-shaft. His one thought was to get out of the house as quickly as possible. Such a course meant leaving Una, but greater considerations even than her safety were involved, and he did not think for a moment that Sir Mortimer would offer her physical violence. How to rescue her could be decided later; at the moment the imperative need was to convey his news to the outside world.

This was easier thought of than done, for the kitchens were underground, and offered no immediate means of escape. It seemed pretty certain that he would have to make his way out on the level of the ground floor, and in the meantime, judging from the course the conversation in the dining-room had taken, someone would soon be coming down on a visit to the caves.

Taking off his shoes, he darted out into a dark passage and hid in an alcove while a man, whom he presumed from his heavy tread to be Copping, came

down the passage and passed through into the kitchens.

Peter did not wait to learn if the man discovered the absence of the chef and his assistant, but flew up the stairs. There was a door at the top which he opened cautiously, and finding that it led into the hall and that the hall appeared to be empty, he ran straight to the front door. It was an old-fashioned, heavily bolted affair, with the bolts shot, and as he worked them back from their slots a slight noise from behind made him turn his head. There, with his eyes wide open with astonishment, stood the little man he had met in the post-office the preceding afternoon.

It was a desperate moment, for Peter was unarmed. So also, it appeared, was the little man, for as Peter turned and made a frantic, hurried attempt to open the door, he let out a yell for assistance. Abandoning the door as hopeless, Peter made a rush for the man, who scuttled back like a hare into the room he had just left, and the next instant Peter had sprung up the stairs, three at a time, and disappeared in the darkness of the landing. As he reached the top he heard the dining-room door open.

There was no time for thought. Switching on his light, he flung himself at the first door he came to, but it was locked, and he hastened to the next, hurried on by the uproar which suddenly broke out downstairs. As he reached it the door opened and a girl stood on the threshold. In an instant she took in the situation.

"Quick! In here," she said, and a moment afterwards she had closed and locked her door. Peter was about to speak when she held up a warning

finger. Voices sounded from the landing, and there came a loud knock at the door.

"Una!" called Sir Mortimer's voice imperatively.

She caught him by the arm and hurried him to a tiny dressing-room, where she pointed to a trap-door in the ceiling.

"They'll never think of looking up there," she whispered. "I can keep them a couple of minutes at least."

"Una! Una!" The knocking on the door grew thunderous.

She darted back into the room and answered in a sleepy voice, as if she had just been awakened:

"Yes, what is it?"

"Open the door at once," demanded her uncle.

"Can't I be left alone even at night?" she answered wearily from the bed. "Oh, what's the matter?

"I tell you to let me in!"

"Oh, all right," was the resigned reply. "Wait a minute."

She ran back noiselessly to the dressing-room, where Peter's legs were in the act of disappearing through the trap-door. His face appeared anxiously at the entrance.

"If they interfere with you I shall come down," he whispered.

She waved impatiently for him to be gone; then, having removed from the dressing-table the chair by which he had ascended to the trap-door, she went back to the room and unlocked the door.

"What *is* the matter?" she asked, as her uncle strode furiously through.

"Where is he?" he demanded. "What have you done with him?"

"My dear uncle, do try to talk rationally. Where is who?"

"You know perfectly well who I mean. He came in here, I know he came in here. Every other door in this corridor is locked." He glared at her for a moment and then began to search the room. Una seated herself on the bed with a weary sigh.

"I suppose you'll explain what you mean sooner or later. You must think I'm fond of men if you think I'm likely to hide one here. I assure you the men I meet in this house have cured me of any desire for male society for ever. I suppose you think I'm hiding that poor Mr. Brown?"

"I don't think; I know," snapped the scientist, and called to the man who waited at the door. "Arthur, tell Mrs. Black to come here at once." Then he disappeared into the dressing-room. Una laughed.

"He's escaped then, has he?" she called after him. "Well, I'm glad, and I hope he gets away." He came back angrily from the dressing-room, and she smiled up at him, insolently swinging her legs. "And if I did know where he was I shouldn't tell you—now."

The significance of that "now" was not lost on Sir Mortimer, and he made an effort to control his temper.

"Don't you realize this man is trying to ruin us?" he asked, with a belated attempt at reasonableness. "Don't you understand he's a spy, in the pay of my worst enemies—and you go and befriend him."

Her eyes glinted viciously. "I certainly would if I could. Men who knock people about like you let

Horstman knock Mr. Brown about seem to me not far removed from savages, and their victims need befriending. I don't care whether he's a spy or not; he's a man, at any rate, which is more than can be said for anyone else in this house. And now perhaps you'll leave me, please; I'm tired."

As she spoke Copping appeared in the doorway with an excited face. "Guv'nor, he's got away again," he cried. "I just found Alphonse and Fred—tied up in a cupboard they were—I heard 'em kickin' the door. . . ."

Una clapped her hands softly. "Oh, splendid," she murmured. "One man against all of you and he escapes every time!"

"How he got away this time I can't pretend to understand, but I shall soon find out," replied Sir Mortimer slowly. "But there is one thing you may depend upon, Una, and that is that he will never leave this house."

"Perhaps he's left it already," she suggested.

Sir Mortimer made no reply, and before anything more was said Mrs. Black entered the room. Bidding her stay there for the remainder of the night, the scientist then addressed a final word to his niece.

"As for you, Una, I shall have something further to say to you in the morning. Whether you really know where he is or not I haven't yet made up my mind. But if I find you have been helping him again it will be him I shall punish, not you. Just think that over."

"I will; but, you see, you've got to find him first," she retorted as the door closed.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE LOCKED ROOM

### (1)

PETER listened to the conversation between Una and her uncle with a quaking heart, determined to go to the girl's help at all costs if they attempted to molest her, but praying that the need would not arise. His relief when he heard her more than holding her own was great, although he realized that his troubles were by no means over. The presence of Mrs. Black in the bedroom made escape impossible in that direction for the moment, and he accordingly set about exploring his hiding-place.

The light from his torch showed that he was standing immediately under the roof, in the space left between the tiles and the ceiling of the room below. Although built only two stories high, the house was a large one, and he could see that the joists extended a considerable distance; further, indeed, than the torch revealed. He was still in his stockinged-feet, and he began to make his way like a cat over the joists, hopeful of finding another trap-door or some similar outlet. He soon ascertained that the area over which he could roam was considerable, apparently covering more than half the house, but nowhere could he perceive any means of descent.

Once or twice he thought he heard voices in one of the rooms below, and this presently gave him an

idea. He had a small penknife in his pocket and, choosing a place where the lath-and-plaster was not so thick as elsewhere, he lay down on his stomach and commenced, with infinite caution, to make a hole. It was a long job, for he dared not make any noise, and though the plaster crumbled easily enough there was always the risk that a stray piece might fall into the room beneath. In addition to this there was the necessity of working for the most part in darkness, partly lest a chink of light should betray him, and partly for fear that the torch itself should begin to fail. At length the point of his knife met with no resistance, and he applied his eye to the hole. Nothing could be seen; the room—if room it was—was in darkness. Putting one ear to the opening, he held his breath and listened, but could hear no sound. Very carefully he enlarged the hole with his fingers and listened again; then, almost reassured that there was no one below, he switched on the torch and shone it through.

It showed an empty bed with the clothes thrown back, as if someone had been lately sleeping there; a table by the bedside on which was a book and a candlestick; a chair over which the clothing was carelessly thrown—women's clothing. For a few puzzled moments he thought he must be looking into the bedroom of one of the servants. Then he remembered he had seen no women servants at St. Cloud; this must be the room of Mrs. Black. He grinned to himself as he realized his luck, and straightway began to enlarge the hole. He worked quicker now, for the opening was immediately over the bed, and when

pieces of plaster fell they made no sound. Finally, when he thought there was room for him to squeeze through, he clicked on the torch and dropped it neatly on the bed; then he lowered himself until his hands were gripping the top of one of the joists and let go.

It was a six-foot drop, and he landed with less noise than he expected, and immediately hurried to the door. Apparently the household was not yet abed, for there were lights in the hall below. Peter looked at his watch; it was three o'clock . . . it would be several hours before Venning and his men could arrive. He waited a little to make sure his descent had roused no one, and then went to the window. The beginnings of dawn were visible in the sky, and by the uncertain light he made out that the window overlooked a yard, with a flight of steps, such as might lead into a coal-hole, immediately below him. To attempt to jump from that height, with the certainty of alighting on the steps, was not to be thought of, and there was no rain-pipe handy. He went back to the door and peered forth again. The odds, he knew, were that someone would be left on guard; on the other hand, there was just a chance they had come to the conclusion that he had got clean away. Creeping to the banisters he peered over. Quite a considerable portion of the hall was visible, but there was no sign of anyone on guard. Should he risk it or attempt to slip away through another of the bedrooms? Neither course had much to commend it; for entry into a bedroom might arouse some sleeper, while there was the distinct likelihood that

the hall, with its inviting emptiness, was nothing less than a trap to entice him out.

He began to descend the stairs, until most of the hall was to be seen, and still there appeared to be no one about. The impulse to make a sudden dash for the front door was strong, but it was clear from the lights that some of the household were still awake, and he had no wish to repeat the experience of a few hours previously. If there was an invisible sentinel patiently waiting for him to emerge, the front door was the very place he would watch, besides which there was always the risk of the bolts proving noisy. Much wiser to try to slip away through the window of one of the rooms.

As he neared the bottom of the stairs he noticed a kind of alcove full of coats and hats which offered temporary concealment, and he was about to make use of it when he saw that a door at the rear of the hall was standing half-ajar, the room into which it led being in darkness. Here lay his way of escape, he decided immediately. It was only a matter of half a dozen yards to the door, and he had just reached it when something sang past his head and hit the woodwork with a vicious thud. For a fraction of a second he gazed in astonishment at the knife that stood quivering in the panel; then he swung round and perceived, standing near the alcove he had noticed, the grinning figure of a man, his arm still extended with the effort of his throw. At the same instant he recognized him as the dago with the scar who had tried to kill him on the quay at Tregenneth.

What the other's instructions had been it is

impossible to say. Probably he had been ordered to do no more than raise the alarm if the necessity arose, but had been unable to resist the temptation of such an easy target. How he came to miss his aim at such a short distance and why he did not at once call for help are questions that will very likely never be answered; what is clear is that when he did shout it was too late. True, he pulled out another knife and attempted to use it, but it was about as much use as a meat skewer against Peter's furious rush. There was only one blow in that fight—just one tremendous drive with all the pent-up feeling of the last twelve hours behind it—and it did not fail to reach its mark.

But the man's call had been heard. Even as Peter recovered his balance the dining-room door was flung open, and Sir Mortimer appeared, a revolver in his hand. Instantly he fired, but the bullet went wide, while Peter ran desperately for the only cover he could see, the room with the open door. Another bullet zipped past him as he dived through and flung the door behind him. A glance showed that it had neither key nor bolt, and he hurriedly swung his torch round the room, revealing two further doors in the opposite wall. Throwing open the first, he saw a long passage with a further door at the end, and he dashed down it as the chase broke noisily into the room he had just left. But when he opened the further door hope nearly left him, for at his feet were steps descending, presumably, to a cellar. There was nothing for it, however, but to go on, and he plunged down with the vague idea of finding a weapon and making a good fight of it before he was overcome.

At the bottom he found another door which opened to his joy, into a passage that he recognized as the one up which he had passed earlier in the evening; and he followed it unhesitatingly, remembering the other track that ran past the tunnel leading to the cave of the octopus. Where it would take him to he had not a notion, but the pursuit was so perilously close that he could see over his shoulder the reflection of their light, and he was determined to go on until it was impossible to go further. Presently he passed the entrance that branched off to the octopus cave, after which the walls fell away, and he seemed to be descending through a series of caves. He thanked his stars that the pathway was smooth, for a pursuit over rocks would have played havoc with the soles of his feet.

The slope grew steeper and more winding, and he was compelled to proceed with greater caution. It struck him that the air, which had been stuffy, was becoming fresher, and he thought he could smell the sea. He stopped a moment to listen. Down the tunnel there still came the muffled echo of hurrying footsteps, but also, in the background, was the unmistakable murmur of moving water, and he thrilled to the sound. Somewhere at the end of the track there must be an outlet, and it could not be far away. He put out his torch. Ahead, sure enough, the pale gleam of daylight showed, and he hastened eagerly towards it. All at once the track ceased at the brink of a precipitous fall in the rock and, peering over, he looked down into a huge cavern, faintly illuminated from above, in the depths of which water sobbed and gur-

gled. The top of an iron ladder revealed a means of descent, and he instantly availed himself of it.

To descend hurriedly an iron ladder of some hundred rungs, however, is not an easy task for an unpractised hand, and he soon realized that before he reached the bottom his pursuers would arrive at the top. Fortunately, the ladder leaned slightly inward near the ground, and he was thus enabled to rest a few moments in temporary security while he decided on his next move. He could hear Sir Mortimer's voice raised in excited argument overhead; from which he gathered, in the first place, that they were by no means in agreement as to whether he was still in front, and in the second that there was a certain reluctance to be the first to descend the ladder. This was all to the good, and he glanced rapidly round the cave for a possible hiding-place. And then he saw that in the middle of the cave, gently moving to the rise and fall of the water, was a motor-boat.

He stared at it in amazement. It was a large boat, capable of holding a score of people—yet how had it possibly got there? The walls of the cave were solid rock, and there was no visible opening; yet obviously an opening there must be. He noticed that below the surface of the water there was a hole in the rock which plainly led to the open sea, for the light filtered through greenly; but it was fully a fathom under water, and it seemed impossible that the tide could ever fall sufficiently low to allow a boat to enter.

The submerged hole, however, suggested an idea, and as he could hear sounds overhead which indicated

that someone had commenced to descend the ladder, he divested himself of his coat and waistcoat. It was then that an extraordinary thing occurred. Apparently from the solid face of the rock facing him there came a sound—the sound of a very loud and powerful sneeze.

Peter gaped at the wall of rock like a man struck dumb. There was only one man he knew sneezed in that hearty fashion: the man he had last seen lying unconscious in a Tregenneth cottage. But where in the name of sanity was he?

And then he heard a well-remembered voice say: "Well, Tommy, it ain't any use stopping here any longer. Let's go back."

(ii)

Incredulity, a sense of enormous relief, and an unbelievable joy chased themselves across Peter's mind as he heard those familiar accents. He forgot that an armed man was hurrying down the ladder with the deliberate intention of killing him; he forgot everything save the fact that he was once more in touch with friends, and that whatever happened to him now there were others who would exact a just retribution from the gang. The sudden reaction made him careless of his own safety; he felt that nothing his enemies were capable of doing could hurt him now, and emerging from the shelter of the rock he waved his hand gaily to the man descending the ladder. Bullets spattered harmlessly about him as he ran to the edge of the water.

"Hello, there—Bridgewater!" he yelled. "Look out for me that side!"

The next moment he plunged into the water in the direction of the opening in the rock. As he swam through, he noticed that the wall of rock above the hole was of an almost incredible thinness, the significance of which struck him at once, and he realized the explanation of Tom Damon's phantom motorboat. Rising to the surface, he found day had dawned, and that, as he expected, he was in the identical spot which he had visited with Damon on the previous morning. A few yards from the cliff-face lay a motorboat full of men, every one of whom was staring at him with a face of almost comical astonishment.

"God bless my soul, it's old Brown!" declared Mr. Bridgewater, as Peter swam to the boat and was pulled on board by eager hands. "Where in thunder have you sprung from, and what was that firing?"

Peter held up a warning finger. "Shove her out a bit," he said in a low voice. "I've got tremendous news, and they'll hear if we stop where we are."

As old Tom Damon, who was handling a pair of sculls in the bow, tugged the boat slowly away from the cliff, Peter grinned at the company. Three besides Bridgewater he knew—Lamont, Major Tremayne, and Claggs; the other three had the appearance of plain-clothes policemen, well-set-up fellows who looked capable of holding their own in a rough-and-tumble anywhere.

"That's far enough," Peter said at length. "Half the gang are in that cave—the one I've just left—and as they must have heard your voice they'll know

the game is up. We must gather them in at once; there's enough evidence to shop the lot a dozen times over. They're mad, all of them—stark, staring mad. I listened last night to such a plan as I wouldn't have believed it possible for grown men to discuss seriously."

In a few terse sentences he told of the conversation he had overheard in the service-lift. "It sounds like the plot of a shilling-shocker, but the tragedy of it is they are all in deadly earnest," he added. "They really believe they'd be able to hold up three countries and force them to disgorge cash. It's so infantile as to be past crediting. But though they'd never succeed they'd stir up the devil's own brew before we could lay 'em by the heels. How many men have you on the island?"

"Fourteen," said Bridgewater. "Including Venning and Cartwright. We'd better go back to the harbour straight away."

"Wait a minute; there's a motor-boat under the cave, and that wall of rock is a fake and either pulls up or lets down. It's the back door to 'St. Cloud,' and they'd slip away like a shot if we went off. They're probably watching us now through some spy-hole or other. Oh, the whole place is laid out like a fort. They've even got a pet octopus in a cave which Drude seems to have used to experiment on with his rays, and which very nearly experimented on me."

"Has he got any of his ray instruments with him?" asked Tremayne.

"I can't say; I haven't seen any," said Peter. "I imagine they've already been sent to the theatres of operation, but I can't be sure."

As he spoke there was the sound of a shot at close quarters, and something like a great beetle sang over their heads, while everyone ducked instinctively.

"Damn it, this won't do," said Bridgewater, producing a revolver and eyeing the cliff uneasily. "Start her up, Tommy, or we'll get potted. That was a rifle."

The engine fired at once, and the motor-boat had begun to move rapidly through the water when there came another shot, which again flew overhead.

"They're firing from the rock right enough," Bridgewater observed, "I saw the flash. It seems to me, Peter, you've had your share of luck in getting away from this crowd without being hurt."

"I know that," said Peter soberly. "But it isn't only luck that's been on my side. If it wasn't for that girl I shouldn't be here now, Bridgewater. It makes me sick to think I couldn't get her out of their clutches."

"She won't come to any harm," Tremayne assured him cheerfully. "A girl like that knows how to look after herself. Hello, another shot! Blaze away, my hearties! If you couldn't hit us before you certainly won't now."

"Pretty poor shooting, isn't it?" remarked Lamont.

"Shocking!" agreed Tremayne. "What's the programme now, Jimmy me lad?"

Bridgewater pointed to a boat that had just come into sight round a bend, pulled lustily by a couple of fisherman in blue jerseys. "I'm going to send you round to the harbour in that. Peter and me and the others'll keep an eye on the cave entrance while you get in touch with Venning. Tell him to go ahead as

soon as he likes; with a bit of luck we'll have every man jack of them in the bag before breakfast. If there's any shooting—well, he'll know what to do. And send a man back with half a dozen blasting cartridges; I'm going to have a look at Master Drude's back door."

The fishing boat was stopped, and its occupants, having been informed of as much as it was considered good for them to know, old Tom Damon, grumbling and protesting, was made to get in, and Tremayne followed.

"What about you, Lamont?" Bridgewater lifted an inquiring eye to the American. "Going back with them?"

Lamont laughed shortly. "I guess not. Not unless you darn well make me."

"Right. Let her go, Tommy."

"There's one thing that puzzles me," said Peter as the boat pulled away. "And that is how on earth you happened to be hanging about outside that cave so early in the morning."

"Better ask your friend Lamont here," was the reply. "It's his idea. Not that we expected to find you swimming about in the water. To be quite candid, I was in two minds as to whether I'd ever see you alive again when I heard you didn't return to the hotel last night. Lamont had a notion about there being some kind of a passage up to the house hereabouts."

"That's so," nodded Lamont. "I got thinking about that mystery motor-boat you told me of, and got a hunch there might be a hole of some kind which you'd missed."

Mr. Bridgewater produced a nasal spray and began to apply it to his nostrils. "I hope they won't be long with those cartridges," he observed.

In the semi-darkness of the cave three men looked at each other with set faces.

"So long as I live," said Sir Mortimer slowly, "I shall continue to regret that I didn't kill Peter Brown when I had him in my power."

"Regret! What the hell's the good of regretting?" cried Kreller angrily. "If it wasn't for your damned ideas of revenge we shouldn't be in this mess now." He flung the rifle he carried into the stern of the motor-boat. "Muddle, muddle, muddle, all the time! That blasted thing is about as much use as a piece of wood!"

"It certainly won't be improved by your handling it in that fashion," said Eversdale shortly. "We'd better get back to the house and find out how many there are against us. If they're only a handful we'll fight them; if not, there's always the passage to the dolmen. But in any case, Mortimer, I think the career of Dr. Reddieson has come to a close."

"What about having the motor-boat out and going after 'em guv'nor?" said Copping hoarsely, joining the group. "I'll have the wall up in a brace of shakes, and they can't 'ave gone far."

Eversdale shook his head. "No good, Copping, I'm afraid—waste too much time. Collect the rifles from the boat—there should be half a dozen—and bring them and any ammunition you may find along to the house. And by the way, Mortimer," he added, pausing as he was about to mount the ladder. "Those tripods

you used for the early experiments—I suppose you could still use them if necessary?"

He disappeared up the ladder into the gloom, and silently the others followed.

(III)

The accounts which have appeared in the Press of the fight between law and disorder that took place in the early morning of July 22nd are so fresh in the minds of the public that to do other than recapitulate them would be wearisome. Exaggeration and invention, however, have played such a conspicuous part in the accounts that a good deal of misconception seems to have arisen as to the true facts of the case. Peter Brown, for example, has been made out to be a sort of Galahad who overcame the gang single-handed; whereas actually the part he played in their final downfall was a small one. The character of Sir Mortimer Drude, too, has been absurdly overdrawn. He has been described as a mixture of "Peter the Painter" and the Apache Bonnet, neither of whom he resembled in the least; the truth being that he was simply a brilliant physicist whose brain had become affected by a well-known disease notorious for its occasionally disastrous effect on the moral character of its victims. The rumour that he was in the pay of a foreign government is all bunkum, and on a par with the sensational report that he was seen alive in Paris on the day following the round-up of the gang. Briefly, then, the facts are these:

Colonel Venning, it appears, had already posted his

men in the neighborhood of "St. Cloud" before receiving Bridgewater's message, besides leaving two men at the Creux harbour. Upon being joined by Major Tremayne he gave immediate orders for the house to be surrounded, and himself marched boldly up to the front door, accompanied by three policemen. No reply being forthcoming to his summons, and the door proving to be locked, a window at the side was forced, and an entrance made by the policemen, every precaution being taken against a trap. Their orders were to shoot at the least sign of armed resistance. Finding the room empty, and seeing no one in the hall, they drew the bolts of the front-door and admitted Venning, who was about to begin a search of the lower rooms when a messenger came flying with the news that men had been observed crossing a field some distance away, and that upon being challenged one of them had drawn a revolver and wounded a sergeant. The man who fired the shot, it was subsequently learnt, was Pagleiro; which seems to prove that Eversdale had quickly abandoned all idea of defending the house —he probably had early information of the extent of the forces against him—and had escaped by the underground passage leading to the dolmen.

Leaving a couple of men on guard at "St. Cloud," Venning immediately gave chase, and coming upon some of the fugitives in a lane, a running fight of a rather irregular nature ensued. Several of the gang were armed with rifles, and more than one of the attacking party were severely injured. Their intention seems to have been to make for the landing-place at Havre Gosselin, where they may have hoped to get

away in boats. Two of them actually succeeded in reaching the landing-place and, stealing a boat, rowed some distance in the direction of Guernsey; but they were quickly overtaken and brought back ignominiously to Sark, one of them—it was Alphonse, the fat cook—with a bullet in his arm. Another group was forced to surrender near the Colinette after an exchange of firing in which one of the gang was shot dead.

A little later word was brought that two men with rifles had been driven towards Little Sark, and had taken refuge at the far end of the Coupée with the clear intention of shooting anyone who attempted to cross. The Coupée, as everyone knows, is a natural causeway three hundred feet above sea-level, which stretches like a gigantic railway embankment across the hundred-yard gap between Sark and Little Sark. The road across this isthmus is in no place more than ten feet across, with a sheer drop on one side and a steep slope on the other, and a machine-gun company at one end could hold up a battalion. With these two men ensconced one on either side of the path it looked as if the task of dislodging them would prove a difficult one.

But they had reckoned without Venning, a former King's Prizeman. Having reconnoitred the position he took one of the captured rifles and disappeared among the gorse near the cliff-side. Presently there was the sound of a single shot, and the men peering towards Little Sark saw a figure attempt to rise and stumble forward, and then roll down on to the path of the Coupée, where it lay still. Immediately afterwards the other man was observed to run, gun in hand

and doubled up, over the slope leading into Little Sark.

The man on the path was quite dead. He was a tall, angular man with a goat-like beard, and his fierce face was twisted into an expression of anger that was somehow pathetically futile. . . .

"Kreller," said Venning briefly.

There was no sign of the other man when they reached the top of the rise. Venning moved cautiously down the narrow lane, his rifle ready for instant use.

Suddenly he flung the rifle to his shoulder, and then slowly lowered it; for, seated at the side of the road, placidly smoking a cigarette, was the man he was seeking—a short swarthy man who smiled blandly at his approach.

"Shoot, my friend, if you like," he said. "It will make no difference. I am philosopher enough to know when I am beaten. Only the weak and foolish struggle in the net from which there is no escape—and it is undignified to struggle." He held out his wrists for the handcuffs with an amused expression. "And I shall not trouble you for many minutes—now."

Venning looked at him searchingly. "Where did you leave the others—Drude and Eversdale?" he demanded sternly.

Pagleiro continued to regard him with the same air of quiet amusement, but his face had turned livid. "No, no, my friend, you must not expect that. I tell as much as I choose—no more. I have—what you say?—shot my bolt and failed, but I do not give away my friends." He shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"Alas! We have all failed. As your Shakespeare says—"

He broke off, and his face changed to a horrible colour. And then with dreadful suddenness the end came. . . .

Venning looked down at the still twitching body with an inscrutable expression, and then, feeling a touch on his arm, turned to find one of his men gazing fixedly in the direction of the main part of the island.

"Isn't that smoke over there, sir—like as if there was a house on fire?" the man said, pointing to a distant clump of trees beyond which a thick smudge, visible against the clear morning sky, was rapidly growing.

"It looks to me," remarked Venning thoughtfully, "very much like 'St. Cloud.'"

(IV)

As the sound of firing reached the motor-boat, Bridgewater nodded for the man at the helm to start the engine.

"Time we were making a move," he observed. "Pray Heaven they haven't left anyone on guard in the cave."

The motor-boat began to glide along under the cliffs towards the spot they had been watching. There was not a man among those on board who did not feel acutely uneasy as they drew near, half-expecting a rifle to blaze out from the face of the cliff at any moment; and the relief when the boat eventually

reached its destination without any untoward incident was great.

But now a difficulty arose. As has been said, the cliffs descended sheer to the water, and the sea fortunately being calm they were enabled to approach close enough to fend off the boat with their hands. But though Bridgewater had ready his dynamite cartridges and firing apparatus, it was discovered there was neither nook nor cranny in which to fix them; nor had they any drills. The dilemma was settled, despite the protests of Bridgewater, who was not unnaturally anxious lest someone might still be lurking in the cave, by Peter once more diving for the hole under the rock.

He was fully aware that he was running a considerable risk. But he reasoned that if the cave harboured an enemy he would have certainly fired at the boat through one of the invisible loopholes as they approached; moreover, the proximity of danger during the last twelve hours had so dulled the edge of his apprehension that it is doubtful if he would have hesitated in any case. The sound of distant firing, which he supposed meant that the attack had begun, had set him nearly frantic with anxiety. Venning, he knew, would strain every effort possible to save Una from hurt; nevertheless, his imagination pictured horrible things happening to her. . . .

As before, he had no difficulty in negotiating the hole, and as he rose to the surface in the dark interior of the cave he perceived a man following him through the opening, and recognized Lamont.

"Thought I'd better come along in case of trouble,"

gasped the American apologetically as he climbed out beside Peter. "Anybody hanging around?"

Peter had brought with him a pocket lamp which had luckily survived immersion, and he flashed it round the cave. Except for the motor-boat it was empty. The light, however, revealed a large wheel attached to the rock, round the axle of which was wound one end of a thin steel rope that disappeared into the upper darkness of the cavern. Lamont at once seized the handle and turned. For a few seconds nothing happened: then the shape of the hole under the rock began to alter, and gradually a slab or panel in the wall of the cave rose dripping from the water, leaving a passage several feet wide open to the sea.

"Some craftsmanship," commented Lamont as he made the handle fast. "Looks like concrete to me. Rather awkward if some mineralogist had happened along with a hammer, though."

Peter shouted for Bridgewater to enter, and the two motor-boats were soon side by side. As a precautionary measure the piece of camouflaged rock was then lowered into its former position, and Peter led the way up the ladder. It was no easy task for Bridgewater, but at length all reached the top and began the steep climb up the concreted track. When they came to the passage leading to the octopus cave it occurred to Peter that some of the gang might be hiding down it, so accordingly two men were left behind with instructions to arrest anyone attempting to pass.

The rest pushed on until they reached the door through which Peter had escaped a few hours previously. Here the utmost caution became necessary.

Stealthily they crept up the stone steps and along the passage. No sound came through the door at the end, and Peter noiselessly turned the handle.

The room was empty, and when they reached the hall it was empty also, save for a large, stolid-looking man who sat on a chair with a pistol across his knee.

At sight of him Bridgewater uttered an exclamation. "Lambert! Why, man, what's this?" he demanded sharply. "What has happened?"

"They've got away, sir—cleared out entirely," said the man. "The whole house is empty; leastways, it was half an hour ago. How they done it I don't know, seeing as we had the house surrounded."

"I know," cried Peter suddenly. "The dolmen! Oh, what a fool not to have seen it before. There must be a secret passage between the dolmen and the house, and that explains how they got me here yesterday without being seen. Come on, Bridgewater, there's still a chance!"

"It's all right, sir, they've probably got the whole shoot by now," returned the man, and then proceeded, with provoking deliberation, to explain the reason for Venning's absence.

"Why the devil couldn't you have told us that at first, man!" said Bridgewater testily. "Which way did Colonel Venning go?"

"I know the way to the dolmen," put in Lamont quickly.

"Then for God's sake lead on," cried Bridgewater. "I'll never forgive myself if I'm too late."

He hurried away with the American, followed by Claggs and the remaining plain-clothes man. Peter

turned to the stolid-looking Lambert, whom he wanted to ask several questions. He could easily catch up Bridgewater and the others later.

"Have you been all over the house—in every room?" he demanded.

Mr. Lambert stolidly resumed his seat in the hall. "Pretty near," he said.

"What do you mean—'pretty near?'" asked Peter irritably. "Is there any room you haven't been in?"

"Well, there is one; but we'll have it open soon enough when the others come back." He leaned back and surveyed Peter in friendly fashion. "You look a bit wet, mate," he said genially. "Been in the sea?"

Peter wondered why the law did not permit such men to be murdered out of hand.

"For God's sake answer my question," he cried. "Which room is it?"

"It's up at the far end of the first landing," was the calm reply. "You won't open it, though. I've tried, but it's made of steel, and locked, and there isn't no key. There's no hurry; we'll have it open soon enough when the rest come back."

And the stolid Mr. Lambert produced a crumpled cigarette from an inner pocket and proceeded to light it.

Peter waited for no further information, but flew up the stairs three at a time. Mr. Lambert, after making a move as if to follow him, thought better of it and resumed his cigarette. But the next instant he had sprung to his feet, cigarette forgotten, as the

piercing scream of a woman rang through the house. Immediately he darted up the stairs in Peter's wake, but when he reached the landing it was empty. Peter had disappared.

Lambert ran along the landing to the room with the steel door and, after listening a moment, shook the handle violently.

"Let me in—d'yer hear?" he shouted.

There was no reply, but he could hear a man's voice within, and he shouted again, kicking the door with his heavy boots. For all the effect it had he might have been kicking the door of a safe. There was again no response, and after a moment's thought he ran quickly downstairs.

Peter had taken the contents of the syringe full in the face the instant the door had opened. The liquid momentarily blinded him; then a curious dullness overcame his limbs, and he crashed to the floor, dimly conscious that the steel door had closed behind him. But the strange thing was that he did not lose consciousness. His body was completely paralysed, yet when he was able to open his eyes his faculties were working perfectly, and he could see, hear, and understand all that was happening.

The room was fitted up as a small chemical laboratory. Glass-stoppered bottles by the hundred covered those parts of the walls not given up to cupboards, and there were several tables full of apparatus tidily arranged. Three singular instruments on steel tripods like theodolites occupied different corners; they were cylindrical in shape, and each was pointing to a chair in the fourth corner on which Una Drude sat tightly

bound with ropes. And in the centre of the room, still holding the syringe, stood the designer of this tableau, benevolently regarding his captives.

"At last," he said gently, "at last I have the unique honour, alone and unassisted, of offering you welcome."

He smiled slightly as a voice became audible outside the door, but otherwise he ignored it.

"You have escaped me so often," he continued, "that by the mere law of averages your luck was bound to turn. I am ready to admit that, since you have been instrumental in compelling my friends to depart with rather more haste than they had intended, you have some cause to congratulate yourself; but I think you will admit also that now we are alone it is possible that I may be in a position to redress the balance."

He laid down the syringe and fixed his marble eyes on Peter. "Luck for once has been with me. When I saw your policemen blundering about near the dolmen I realized that my chances of escape in that direction were slight. To a first-class mind such as mine, it was not very difficult to foresee what would happen. The police would immediately try to cut us off from the boats, while you, as I imagined, thinking we were still in the house, would try to take us in the rear. I therefore returned to the house by the dolmen and succeeded in reaching this room, where I had already left Una, and where I hoped that sooner or later I should be privileged to offer you my hospitality. This is where luck has been with me. Would you, when you heard of the locked room—as you were

bound to do—investigate it at once, or would you follow your friends to join in the battle? That was the question I had to decide. And I decided rightly, Mr. Peter Brown. Your vulgar and insatiable curiosity has once more led you into trouble, and this time is the last. I think before I have finished with you you will be sorry you ever escaped death at the hands of the *Cephalopeda.*"

The suave, even sentences, uttered with cold passion, affected Peter far more than raving would have done. That Sir Mortimer was abnormal he had long known, but hitherto, however strange had been his conduct, it had always halted at offering physical violence to Una. The fact that she was bound to the chair showed clearly that whatever restraint he had exercised on his hatred was at an end.

His eyes met hers, and he read in them terror.

Sir Mortimer moved towards one of the instruments, and standing behind it, with his eyes glued to the sights, adjusted a thumbscrew.

"People talk loosely about liberating atomic energy," he observed thoughtfully, "but few realize the power concentrated in light; in fact we are only at the beginning of understanding what light means to health. I look forward to the time when we shall be able not only to concentrate the energy of the sun as we compress gas in a cylinder to-day, but also to store it and liberate it at so much per unit from a power-station. I do not mind telling you for your curiosity that the Drude rays are nothing more than light—bottled light, if you like. You would not understand it if I explained it to you. But you have already seen what

happens when the three rays focus on a given point. Well, I am now going to give you another demonstration, this time entirely for your own delectation. In fact I am going to let you be your own demonstrator. Look at this, Mr. Peter Brown. It is a switch. I have only to move it—so!—and the instrument becomes alive. The others are already alive; and I would point out that the focal point is—" He waved his hand vaguely in Una's direction. "Again, for the satisfaction of your curiosity, I have calculated that it will be roughly fifteen seconds from the time when the switch is moved until death puts an end to her—er—discomfort. And you, my dear Mr. Brown, shall yourself turn the switch."

Seizing the inanimate Peter he dragged him to a chair beside the instrument, where with some difficulty he proceeded to tie him up in the same way that Una was tied, except that he left his right arm free. This done, he tied to the free wrist a length of twine, on the other end of which he made a small loop.

"That, I think, completes the preparations," he said. "We will now bring you round."

From one of the tables he took a hypodermic syringe, already charged, and injected his victim's arm. In a few minutes the most excruciating agony began to flow from the middle of Peter's body outwards to his limbs. It was like cramp, only worse, but mercifully its duration was short; and presently he could tell by the way the thongs dug into his flesh that life and feeling had returned. At the same time he recovered his voice.

"What good do you suppose this will do you?"

he asked vehemently, and his voice shook despite himself. "It's murder; it's torture. I didn't think a man of your intellectual attainments would descend to torture, Sir Mortimer—on your own niece, too!"

"I have yet to discover that you are capable of thinking at all," was the curt reply. "Believe me, nothing you can say, no appeal you can make, no money you can offer, can alter my determination in the least, Mr. Brown. Your people may arrest me, though I think it is extremely unlikely; but even with the prospect of hanging in front of me I should go to the scaffold joyfully if I knew I had revenged myself on you."

Suddenly he seized Peter's free arm, and raising it before the other realized what he was doing, he slipped the loop of the twine over the switch on the instrument.

"Now, Mr. Brown," he said. "You consider yourself an athlete. Let us see how long you are capable of holding out your arm unsupported." And with that Sir Mortimer stepped backwards and stood watching with a look of unholy expectation on his pale countenance.

As the full devilish nature of the plan came home to Peter the sweat broke on his forehead. He was a strong man, and he knew he might be able to hold out his arm for ten, fifteen, or even twenty minutes, but his muscles had not yet recovered from the effect of Sir Mortimer's paralysing treatment, and he knew there must come a moment when his arm would drop from sheer weariness. Never had he conceived such a refinement of cruelty. Torture of a physical kind he could perhaps stand; but this torture was of the mind, the

torture of knowing that the life of the girl he loved depended on his own physical endurance. He had no doubt that the madman had told the truth; here was no mere play designed to frighten. And already his extened arm was beginning to tire. He set his teeth and prayed for strength to hold out until help came—that help which could not be far away now. And yet he knew in his heart that when help did come the chances were that it would be of no avail. Sir Mortimer Drude would never allow them to leave the room alive.

He glanced again at Una; her face was deathly in its whiteness, and her eyes were closed.

"Are you still glad you chose to interfere with my plans, Mr. Peter Brown?" said Sir Mortimer with that deadly suavity which Peter always associated with the scientist. And suddenly he grinned like a maniac.

Peter did not reply, for just then, with a quick tightening of the throat, he perceived something which Sir Mortimer had overlooked: the tiny flaw that exists in most criminal schemes, and is so often the means of wrecking them.

One leg of the tripod stood close to Peter's feet, and though his legs were bound immovably to the chair he knew he was capable of moving the front of his feet laterally, pivoting them, as it were, on his heels. A quick jerk would certainly disturb the delicate focus of the instrument, if it did not actually knock it over.

He kicked; the tripod-leg slipped some distance over the oilcloth; and instantly Peter snapped the string with a downward movement of his arm which

completed the upsetting of the instrument. The next moment Sir Mortimer flung himself on him with a cry, trying to grasp his arm. And then Peter laughed softly. His opportunity had come.

Una, watching with dilated eyes, could at first see only that the scientist was beating fiercely on Peter's face with his fist, although his body seemed to be strangely contorted. And then she saw that Peter had seized hold of his wrist and was twisting it . . . twisting it slowly but inexorably with one powerful hand. Impotently Sir Mortimer was now plucking feebly at his hip-pocket with an arm that would not reach; and all at once there was a scream and a dull crack.

"I'm sorry for this," said Peter. "But it's your arm or our lives." Suddenly he released his hold of one wrist and grabbed the other. "Now," he said sternly, "just undo this rope."

Sir Mortimer's face was grey with pain. "Curse you, you brute!" he gasped. "You've broken my—"

"Do you want to force me to break the other, you fool?" cried Peter. "Undo the rope, I tell you!"

And, weeping and raving, the scientist obeyed. Sir Mortimer was a man twice Peter's age and less than half his strength, but no consideration of false chivalry would have prevented Peter from carrying out his threat if the other had refused.

The moment he was free Peter removed the pistol from the scientist's hip-pocket and then, flinging him aside, went to Una and cut the rope that bound her.

"There, there," he said soothingly, speaking to her as he would have done to a frightened child as he

knelt beside her and took her hands in his. "You're all right now, aren't you? Nothing more to worry about now."

"I—I'm quite—all right, thanks," she said feebly, with a kind of sob, and promptly proved the contrary by fainting.

"Poor kiddie," murmured Peter, lifting her gently in his arms and placing her in an arm-chair. "This is all your doing, Sir Mortimer," he flung angrily over his shoulder. "If there's any justice in the world you should be flogged through the streets for this."

There was no answer, and he looked up; and what he saw made him pull out his pistol and yell like a man possessed. "Put it down!" he cried furiously, for Sir Mortimer had righted the instrument and, one-handed, was adjusting the sights. "Put it down, I say, or by God I'll—"

A roar drowned his threat and a huge yellow flame leapt to the ceiling from the chair on which Una had sat. A fierce crackling sound followed, and immediately the room filled with dense smoke. Coughing desperately, Peter picked Una up in his arms and staggered towards the door. Blinded by the smoke he cannoned into one of the tripods, knocking it over, at which the louder roar at once ceased; but the fire had now a firm hold. He could feel the heat of it on his back as he fumbled at the door. He discovered a key in the lock and managed to turn it; and then, in a blessed moment, his fingers found the handle and, almost choked with the fumes, he tottered out into the corridor with his burden. The door, as if actuated by a spring, clanged to behind him.

Along the corridor he dashed, down the stairs and out into the garden, where he laid Una on the grass, and then proceeded, for the second time that day, to go off into a faint himself.

It was there, a few minutes later, that an alarmed Mr. Bridgewater found them and carried them safely out of reach of the burning house.

THE END